PROFESSIONAL DISCUSSION GROUPS:
INFORMAL LEARNING IN A THIRD SPACE

A Dissertation in
Learning, Design, and Technology

by
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ABSTRACT

In this ethnographic study, I explored two discussion groups and discovered Third Space elements such as cultural hybridity, counterscript, and sharing of experiences and resources contributed to a safe learning environment existing at the boundaries between participant personal and professional spaces. The groups operated under the auspices of a professional membership organization located in the Washington, D.C. area. One group discussed federal government topics; the second focused on organizational coaching topics, and there were 53 participants among both groups. I incorporated video recorded observations and open-ended interviews. I used open and focused coding techniques to categorize the data. I found that during the meetings participants frequently engaged in collective sense making while contributing experiences and opinions that may have resulted in problems for them had they expressed these experiences and opinions within their workplaces among co-workers or clients. As a result of observing interactions and interviewing participants, I have conceptualized a Third Space informal learning environment that is comprised of four interconnected spaces: a safe space, social space, experiential space, and resource space. With this Third Space system, it is the safe space that is at the core with implications for designing informal learning spaces for professionals.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Informal learning has emerged as an important source of learning in the workplace. In a recent survey, the American Society of Training and Development (2008) found that 56% of organizations intended to increase informal learning opportunities, while 34% of respondents relied on informal learning to a high extent. In the same survey, informal networks and communities of practice each comprised 20% of informal learning activities in the workplace. Marsick and Watkins (1990) defined informal learning as learning that occurs outside of classrooms and curricula. Such informal learning may be implicit, occurring during the flow of everyday activities, or it may occur within structured activities or groups (Eraut, 2004).

The topic of my study is informal learning that occurs in discussion groups that operate under the auspices of a national membership organization. Such discussion groups reflect the professional interests of their participants yet are situated on the boundaries of workplace environments. In this study, I explore discussion groups through the lens of Third Space, which has been defined as spaces in which different cultures interact and assume a hybrid form (Bhabha, 1994) and as an other space where imagination thrives (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). Both of these Third Space conceptualizations have appeared in several empirical studies related to learning. The National Research Council (2009) described Third Spaces as theoretical constructs that can be applied to understanding learning in informal settings such as science museums.
In my conceptualization of Third Space, experiential learning is facilitated, reflective learning is enabled, and participants are empowered to question their assumptions and beliefs. Third Space, when it occurs, represents the embodiment of a learning environment. Certain opportunities arise for Third Space interactions to occur, and when they do, learning opportunities are likely to occur. I believe there is an opportunity for Third Space interactions to occur in the setting that I have chosen for my research.

Research Purpose

My purpose is to investigate the nature of learning in professional discussion groups as a Third Space, using an ethnographic research design. I intend to provide a thick description of cultural patterns that are seen in professional discussion groups and discuss how these patterns relate to learning and Third Space concepts and theories. For this research, I define Third Space as a metaphorical space that serves as an environment for cultural hybridity, open discourse, knowledge and experience sharing and reflection. The following are my three research goals:

- Describe in rich detail the pattern of cultural interactions that occur, using a Third Space lens.
- Describe the roles and identities of professional discussion group members in the Third Space.
- Describe the interconnections between informal learning and Third Space within professional discussion groups.
Conceptual Framework

I synthesized both Third Space concepts and informal learning theories to conceptualize informal learning in a Third Space. Table 1.1 summarizes the concepts and theories that comprise my study’s conceptual framework.

Table 1.1. Conceptual Framework for Study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Theoretical Frame</th>
<th>References</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thirding as Othering</td>
<td>Trialectics of Spatiality</td>
<td>• Lefebvre (1991)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Soja (1996)</td>
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<td>Hybridity</td>
<td>Cultural Hybridity</td>
<td>Bhabha (1994)</td>
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<td>Experiential Learning</td>
<td>• Experiential Learning Cycle</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Transcendent Learning</td>
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<td>Funds of Knowledge</td>
<td>Household or Individual Learning</td>
<td>• Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Jarvis (1987)</td>
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<td>Roles</td>
<td>Legitimate Peripheral Participation</td>
<td>• Lave and Wenger (1991)</td>
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<td>• National Research Council (2009)</td>
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<td>Script/Counterscript</td>
<td>Third Space Discourse</td>
<td>• Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995)</td>
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<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Critical Reflection</td>
<td>• Boud (2006)</td>
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<td>• Mezirow (1990)</td>
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<td>• National Research Council (2009)</td>
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<td>Transformational Learning</td>
<td>Double Loop Learning</td>
<td>• Argyris (1982)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Gutiérrez (2008)</td>
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My framework is based upon the idea that Third Spaces differ from the perceived or conceived spaces. Drawing upon Lefebvre’s theories of spatiality, Soja (1996) described Third Space as “Thirding as Othering,” a space that is neither perceived (i.e., First Space) nor conceived (i.e., Second Space). It is a space that functions as an “in-between” space between the perceived world and the planned world offering its inhabitants a nearly unlimited, if metaphorical, potential (Solomon, Boud, & Rooney, 2006). Soja’s conceptualization of Third Space differs from Bhabha’s (1994) postcolonial Third Space where cultures interact resulting in a new, hybrid culture. Dichotomies between dominant and non-dominant cultures break down in Third Space. The result of this interaction among cultures is a new location for culture (Bhabha, 1994).

Cultural hybridity and Thirding as Othering are relevant to informal learning. Discussion groups operate outside of a formal workplace and bring together people from different organizational cultures to converse and share experiences. Experiential learning occurs in the Third Space. Kolb (1984) developed his Experiential Learning Cycle to conceptualize how learner experiences are shared, reflected on, and acted upon in learning environments. Since learners reflect upon their own experiences and those shared by others, I have synthesized several learning theories (Boud, 2006; Mezirow, 1990; National Research Council, 2009) into the framework as a way to make sense of experiential learning that occurs in Third Space. Soja’s (1996, 2009) Thirding as Othering is germane to understanding informal learning in groups, as it occurs in a setting that is outside formal learning environments (whether inside or outside of the workplace) and the workplace setting itself. Group participants interact in a space that is outside the
culture of their workplace setting and outside of a formal classroom learning environment. They are participating in an other space—a Third Space.

Funds of knowledge represent accumulated knowledge introduced into the groups by participants from their homes, workplaces, and other places (Moll et al., 1992). Jarvis (1987) referred to this type of knowledge as a store of knowledge. As with shared experiences, funds of knowledge contribute to hybridity by introducing different perspectives that may serve as an agent for transformation. Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, and Collazo (2004) established funds of knowledge as the analytical lens in their study of Scientific Discourses and Third Space in Detroit high school science classrooms. For these authors, funds of knowledge served as the primary basis for Third Space interaction among participants. Hybridity occurred when the students’ various funds of knowledge interacted with the taught course material thereby creating a new view of understanding.

Discussion groups, which serve as the setting for my study, provide space for participants that border their own workplaces and present an opportunity for cultures to interact leading to opportunities for cultural hybridity. I believe these groups may also serve as an in-between space that transcends the culture of a specific workplace, thereby empowering participants to safely discuss ideas they would not feel comfortable expressing in their own workplaces. In terms of hybridity, this can be seen as the interaction of script (i.e., officially sanctioned discourse) and counterscript (i.e., unapproved and often irreverent discourse) that produces a new understanding and opportunities for transformation (Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Gutiérrez et al., 1997, 1999). Much of the previous research concerning learning in Third Space has involved school
children engaging in discourse in classrooms or afterschool programs, but other studies have involved adult learners. Discussion groups provide an environment for work-related script and counterscript discourse to occur. Hybridity based on transformational script and counterscript dialogue differs from the funds of knowledge conceptualization advanced by Moje et al. (2004). I submit that both types of interactions occur in Third Space.

Third Space provides space for people to question their own beliefs and thoughts about their world in a space well-suited to imagination. Transformation and change is characteristic of Third Space, as reflected by its hybridity and oppositional discourse, and I have included transformational learning in my Third Space conceptual framework. Transformation in a learner’s fundamental beliefs has been characterized as double loop learning, which transpires in spaces referred to as Model II learning environments (Argyris, 1982). Here learners move beyond seeking strategies to win or perform better and question the underlying reasons for thinking the way they do. Double loop learners question their own fundamental assumptions about the world in which they live. Seeking strategies to win without self-questioning and transformation define single loop learning (Argyris, 1982). Characteristics of Third Spaces, including transformation, reflection, questioning, and conflicting discourse reflect Model II learning environments.

Another component of my conceptual framework involves roles and identity. Legitimate peripheral participation as described by Lave and Wenger (1991) served as an analytical frame for identity. Membership in peripheral communities is represented by a sense of being a newcomer but an ability to participate as full or partial members. Third Space is an outside the border space with newcomers and established members but
dependent on peripheral participation. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation is appropriate for reflecting upon the identities of those who interact in Third Space. The National Research Council (2009) noted the importance of informal learners identifying with the practice as a strand in its informal learning conceptual framework. In my conceptual framework, the idea of roles and identity do not relate to engaging in a specific practice; rather, my framework focuses more on the mechanics of being a member in Third Space in which inhabitants interact with one another in ways that facilitate boundary crossings, exchanges of knowledge, shared experiences, open discourse, and, ultimately, transformational learning.

Figure 1.1 represents my study’s conceptual framework that will serve as the guiding analytical lens of the research.

Figure 1.1. Study Conceptual Framework.
Research Questions

1. What are the cultural patterns of interaction that reflect Third Space characteristics in professional discussion groups?
2. What role do funds of knowledge and sharing experiences play in group discussions?
3. How do discussion group participants make sense of the discussions?

Problem Statement

There is no agreed upon definition of informal learning. While there has been research related to informal learning, many of these studies concentrate on family-oriented informal learning in such places as museums or on informal learning that occurs within workplaces. A recent example is the National Research Council’s (2009) book *Learning Science in Informal Environments*, which unveiled a conceptual framework for understanding how people learning science in informal environments through six “strands,” including generating interest in science, understanding scientific concepts, making sense of science, reflecting on science, participating in scientific activities, and identifying with those who contribute to science. There has been little research into the role that professional discussion groups that operate at the edges of workplaces have in fostering informal learning. The central problem of my study is the exploration of Third Space when and where informal learning occurs. Third Space has been examined in empirical studies concerning learning, but these studies have not attempted to connect Third Space concepts with established informal learning theories. I have defined
informal learning in a Third Space as centering on experiences, reflection, funds of knowledge, sense-making through script/counterscript discourse, participant roles and identity, and personal transformation. Using cultural hybridity and Thirding-as-Othering as a lens, I explored the idea that discussion groups function as an in-between space between the professionals who participate in the groups and their workplaces that support informal learning by providing a space for Third Space opportunities.

**Limitations**

My study considers Third Space informal learning opportunities in one type of environment—professional discussion groups. My study is qualitative and particularistic, so generalization is not my primary objective in conducting this research. This limits my study to a specific setting, but my findings may, with appropriate caveats, be generalized to other types of organizations.

The definition of Third Space is limiting. While Third Space has served as a conceptual framework in several educational studies, it remains a metaphorical concept, as exemplified by the view of it as both a space for cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) and as an other space (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996, 2009). Both conceptualizations appear in several empirical educational research studies. I have conceptualized Third Space and have situated its theoretical components in the context of informal learning.
Social Significance

Organizations and groups that seek to foster informal learning, including training professionals and instructional designers and developers who understand that learning often occurs outside of classrooms or a formal curriculum will be interested in the results of my study. Informal learning does not have an agreed upon definition and in workplace settings may be accorded secondary status when compared to formal instruction. Understanding the connection between Third Space and informal learning may lead those responsible for workplace learning to appreciate that encouraging group opportunities that fall outside of the workplace but are related to workplace learning may be a worthwhile goal. For the individual learner, participation in a Third Space may provide a transformative learning experience. I have striven to describe how Third Space transforms learners.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Third Spaces are informal learning environments. Although Third Spaces may be situated in formal learning environments (Barton, Tan, & Rivet, 2008; Cook, 2005; Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Moje et al., 2004), they are also the metaphorical embodiment of autonomy, hybridity, and transformation. It is defined by otherness, even as it unfolds within a formal learning environment. Informal learning may be explored across settings, including implicit informal learning, school-based informal learning, and workplace-based informal learning. In its book, Learning Science in Informal Environments, the National Research Council (2009) characterized informal learning as lifelong (e.g., spanning time), life-wide (e.g., across places), and life-deep (e.g., across cultures and beliefs). My study concentrated on professionals who participate in discussion groups. These groups reflected lifelong, life-wide, and life-deep informal learning. Since my two study groups were populated by workplace professionals, much of the informal learning literature that I reviewed focused on informal learning that occurs in workplace settings. Many of the Third Space empirical studies reviewed was based on research undertaken in school-based settings. My objective in this literature review was to synthesize the conceptual notions of Third Space and informal learning across settings. I found this a challenging proposition given the ambiguous nature of both Third Space and informal learning.
Third Space Concepts

Third Space is characterized by its hybridity of culture and its otherness. Cultural hybridity has been described by Bhabha (1994) in his book, *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha wrote that in Third Space different cultures blend into a new location of culture. Third Space is differentiated in this way from a mindset that focuses on divisive binary patterns, where one culture is in opposition to and completely separate from another culture, which often typifies discussions about cultural diversity and multiculturalism.

Third Space is an “in-between” space where the negotiation of different cultures occurs (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56). For Bhabha, cultural unity or purity in Third Space does not exist. Purity breaks down as a result of the interactions that result in a hybrid culture, or, more specifically, a new location of culture. The acting out of cultural differences in Third Space liberates non-dominant cultures:

The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language, and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot “in itself” be conscious. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 53)

Cultural language is at the core of Bhabha’s conceptualization of Third Space. He compares the subject of proposition versus the subject of enunciation, the difference between speech (dynamic, changing) and writing (stable, unitary) and how language in Third Space is the enunciation of ambivalence that breaks down “homogenizing, unifying forces” through an “open, expanding code” (Bhabha, 1994, pg. 54). The use of language
and textual considerations are critical in other conceptualizations of Third Space (Cook, 2005; Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Gutiérrez et al., 1999).

The geographer Edward Soja (1996, p. 10) provided a somewhat different perspective on Third Space defining it as “…another way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality-historicality-sociality.” The emphasis is on Third Space as the “other” space or as Soja termed it, “Thirding-as-Othering.” In Soja’s (1996, p. 11) Third Space metaphor, First Space is comprised of the real and authentic world; Second Space is comprised of imagined ideas of space based on First Space real-world thinking; and Third Space encompasses spatial imagination, or “real-and-imagined” places. Third Space has its roots in the “trialectics of being,” encompassing spatiality (i.e., space); historicality (i.e., time); and sociality, or our individual being in the world (Soja, 2009, p. 53). Soja (2009, p. 53) defined the “Trialectics of Spatiality” as the perceived, the conceived, and the lived. These trialectics break down First and Second Space dualism, which is also characteristic of Bhabha’s conceptualization of Third Space hybridity. Further echoing Bhabha, Soja (2009, pg. 56) recognized that “Thirdspace is a meeting point, a hybrid place, where one can move beyond existing borders.” Further, Third Space represents going beyond the real and conceived to a space where marginal cultures are not only safe from the dominant culture but integrated with it as well. Conceptually, Third Space represents an open exchange for constantly shifting ideas, encompassing both postmodernist and modernist perspectives. As Soja (2009, p. 54) stated, “Everything comes together in Thirdspace…”
Soja’s Third Space was influenced by the work of philosopher, Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre (1991) described three concepts of social space that inspired the metaphorical Third Space. These concepts included (a) spatial practice, which represented the perceived societal space of daily reality; (b) representation of space, which described conceived and conceptualized spaces that are the domains of planners and architects; and (c) representational spaces, which contained images, symbols, signs, signals, and is lived-in, passively experienced space described by artists, writers. Lefebvre himself used the term Third Space in describing concepts of space. Drawing upon the metaphor of a theatrical play, he discussed how there is the real space (e.g., the stage or pit), a representation of space (e.g., the time period in which the play is set), and a representational space (e.g., a lived-in space as conceived by the playwright). In order for the action of the play to transform from being a representation of a space to being a representational space, the audience and actors must pass through a Third Space. It is only then that the actors on stage are “living” in the time setting of the play, or its representational space. It is at once imagined and real, conceived and perceived. Lossau (2009), a geographer like Soja, has critiqued the concept of Third Space as a spatial unit representing differentiation as characterized by both Soja and Bhabha. For Lossau (2009, p. 69), Third Spaces may not represent a “marker of difference” so much as an ordering scheme or an organizing tool to locate different identities. Lossau’s definition liberates Third Space analysis from falling into the dualistic framework that the conceptualization of Third Space was itself designed to undermine. It opens up the concept.

Third Space conceptual frameworks have been incorporated in empirical studies of learning. In a study of classrooms in Los Angeles, Gutiérrez et al. (1995) described
how Third Space would occur when the official dialogue of the teacher (i.e., script) and the unofficial dialogue (i.e., counterscript) of the students would meet, which occurred infrequently in the authors’ observations. Counterscript is defined as dialogue that may be seen as inappropriate in classroom environments, including giggling and making joking or off-topic comments. When a Third Space interaction finally occurred when a student diverged from the script to introduce a thoughtful counterscript about being multiracial in the context of the seminal Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, the teacher quickly brought the conversation back to his script, demonstrating the unequal power dynamic in the classroom setting and how that affected learning. The authors discussed the idea of student “underlife” in which the students used the teacher’s script dialogue to form their own counterscript dialogue, re-keying the teacher script with phrases, terms, and ideas from their underlife experience (Gutiérrez et al., 1995, p. 461).

In a study of Latino second and third grade school children learning English in an afterschool language club in a working class West coast city, Gutiérrez et al. (1999) conceptualized Third Space as a hybrid space forming an activity system in a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory framework. The authors believed that the afterschool club formed a hybrid space between the students’ homes and school, a space where funds of knowledge and local social practices drawn from home can blend with more formal language learning processes in a school setting to produce learning. Conflict and tension are characteristic of Third Spaces in the authors’ view and a necessary agent in the learning process. The study found that a Third Space presented itself when learners engaged in counterscript dialogue (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). Unlike in their previous study of Los Angeles school classrooms, the teacher in this study met the student’s
counterscript dialogue with formal classroom script in such a way that worked to create a separate Third Space of dialogue that blended the script and counterscript. The teacher in this study did not simply attempt to get the student back on the official script. The authors found that the students in the study responded well and learned enthusiastically. The authors pointed out that this particular space was well-positioned for hybridity and alternative sense-making given its location in an afterschool club and the teacher’s own interest in socio-cultural learning. In his study of university professionals crossing boundaries between professional and academic environments, Whitchurch (2008) found similar hybridity of language occurring in a Third Space. Cook (2005) described Third Space a model for school-based role play that supported a continuum between home and school text construction that draws upon funds of knowledge.

In a qualitative study of school age children, Moje et al. (2004) emphasized the importance of drawing upon experiences and various funds of knowledge to study learning in Scientific Discourses. Their study was set in Detroit and the participants were primarily Latino secondary-school students. There were 30 participants in the study, consisting of 20 females and 10 males. The authors used grounded theory methods in conducting their analysis. Moje et al. (2004) found that students drew upon their home-based funds of knowledge to draw conclusions about science and built connections to Scientific Discourses and their own circumstances and life experiences. Third Spaces provided a space where competing funds of knowledge, resources, and discourses to blend (Cook, 2005; Moje et al., 2004). The participants drew upon their home funds, community funds, peer funds, environmental funds, and popular culture funds in their scientific sense-making. Some participants crossed boundaries between their funds of
knowledge and school-based science; in other cases, there was no connection between what was discussed and the participants’ funds of knowledge. For instance, a discussion about a local river was not relevant to the students, since they did not consider it their river and it was not part of their funds of knowledge. Moll et al. (1992) and Jarvis (1987) have described the importance of learners drawing upon these funds of knowledge in learning from home and workplaces.

Barton et al. (2008) studied Third Space in an ethnographic case study of 6 science classrooms in three New York City schools. The study participants were primarily African-American and Latina and initially consisted of 7 female students and eventually expanded to 13 female students from working class neighborhoods. The authors used several methods, including participant observation, video, and think-aloud activities. They found that the hybrid spaces were created by the participants, and that the spaces were negotiated among themselves through strategic participation in class activities. At various points during the study, the participants placed themselves in positions of authority by changing their identities in novel ways. Participants also created science artifacts on their own, drawing from both their own funds of knowledge and various classroom resources. The activities that the students engaged in were characterized by shifting and merging practices that broke down the boundaries of school by allowing the class discourse to evolve and shift.

Eisenhart and Edwards (2004) designed an afterschool technology program with Third Space hybridity in mind. The participants in the study were primarily working class African-American and Mexican-American female students. Their study was ethnographic, consisting of participant observation and open-ended interviews. The
authors found that the participants created their own Third Spaces when they were encouraged to experiment with technology and resources that were provided to them. In many instances, the students did this in unusual and unorthodox ways that drew from their funds of knowledge and experiences and surprised the researchers who were white, middle class women. The students made technology part of their own lives and reflected their lives in the various artifacts they created for the study using technology. The students used technology to communicate experiences from their backgrounds with one another that the researchers did not immediately grasp, given their different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. This non-conforming activity echoed the counterscript noted in other Third Space studies (Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Gutiérrez et al., 1999). The researchers attempted to balance the freedom of the students to engage in counterscript to learn the technology and relate it to their personal experiences with a need to get the students “back on track.” For the authors, the cultural hybridity that occurred when students related their personal experiences and funds of knowledge to their study of technology enabled successful learning (Eisenhart & Edwards, 2004).

Harris and Simons (2006) envisioned a Third Space for vocational education and training (VET) practitioners in Australia who have been working directly in industry embedded within corporate training departments. The authors used a qualitative case study approach using interviews and observations. A range of industries were selected as case study locations, and the researchers conducted 34 interviews with participants. Crossing boundaries resulted in participant transformation in this study and in others (Harris & Simons, 2006; Whitchurch, 2008). There were cultural clashes at first between the VET and industry learning practitioners, as might be expected, and even desired in a
Third Space environment (Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Whitchurch, 2008). The authors found that technical and further education (TAFE) institutes served as a middle ground between private industry and public training (a blending of both cultures). These became a hybrid space and eventually the TAFE trainers became blended with the culture of the industry they were serving. Whitchurch (2008) noted that university professionals operating in Third Space developed a hybrid language that spoke to both professional and academic needs, and that these professionals acted creatively in Third Space when they were unbounded by professional or academic domains or worked in a blended environment that spanned across both domains.

Third Spaces have also been envisioned as Zones of Proximal Development, or ZPDs (Cook, 2005; Gutiérrez, 2008; Harris & Simons, 2006). Gutiérrez (2008) revisited her previous work on language learning in Third Space and concluded that Third Spaces function as both activity systems and ZPDs. Her conclusions come out of study of high school age children of farm workers who participated in a month long Migrant Student Leadership Institute (MSLI), which is based on sociocultural learning, hybridity, and Third Space conceptualizations of learning environments. Gutiérrez (2008, p. 149) found that children in the Third Space environments transformed everyday language, and institutional literacy was “reframed into powerful literacies.” Participants in the MSLI program wrote autobiographies that evolved into hybrid texts, as the text included the participants’ views as well as collective ideas from other students, MSLI staff and instructors. Communication in Third Spaces is characterized by intersubjectivity. The practices that children engage in outside of school also contributed. Sociocritical literacies emerge from the conflict between formal and informal literacies, where learning
is impacted by a range of tools that is contingent upon the sociohistorical lives of students (Gutiérrez, 2008). Third Space environment participants moved both vertically (from immaturity to maturity) and horizontally through expertise and across settings (Gutiérrez, 2008). This movement across settings has been characterized as life-wide informal learning (National Research Council, 2009). Informal learning can be therefore be characterized as a movement across the various settings in life. Gutiérrez (2008, p. 152) summed up her view of Third Space as a transformational space this way:

In this way, our use of the Third Space construct (contrary to the various interpretations it has attracted; e.g., Moje et al., 2004) has always been more than a celebration of the local literacies of students from nondominant groups; and certainly more than what students can do with assistance or scaffolding; and also more than ahistorical accounts of individual discrete events, literacy practices, and the social interaction within. Instead, it is a transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened.

Transformation of individual identity also occurs in Third Space. English (2002) described the experiences of a women educator working in a developing country and how she constructed and re-constructed her own evolving identity as a feminist and a Catholic, rather than through the lens of dualism. In a qualitative study of 13 women adult educators working in the Global South, English (2005) found that they were able to transcend the dualism of religion and development, Global North and South, and local and global through negotiation of their identities, embracing the conflicts associated with this negotiation, self-reflexivity, and critical reflection on past experiences.
Third Space is a metaphor for a space in which traditional norms and structures need not necessarily apply. As a space, it can be what inhabitants want it to be. It is a space where dualism is broken down and where culture blends to transform into a new transformational culture. It may evolve naturally or be planned, designed, and created. It is a hybrid space that not only allows for conflicting views and identities but depends upon them. It is a space where informal learning occurs.

Definitions of Informal Learning

Defining informal learning is difficult. One may read ten different accounts of informal learning and come away with ten different conceptualizations of what defines it. One straightforward way to distinguish between formal and informal learning in workplaces is that informal learning occurs primarily outside of a formal learning course or established curriculum (Hager, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Informal learning may occur implicitly as a reaction to a crisis or sudden need to know something or it may be more deliberate and planned (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 2001). In their study of informal learning in workplace settings, Boud and Middleton (2003) noted that informal learning was a mechanism that participants used in dealing with atypical situations that arose in the workplace where documented sources of information needed to address the situation were lacking. In her study of work-based learning, Ellinger (2005) reported that in workplaces where space was provided for informal learning opportunities, open and accessible relationships of people who want to learn within the organization created an environment conducive to informal learning.
Informal learning, and by extension learning in Third Space, is defined in my study as learning that transpires outside of the parameters of planned formal learning (even if it occurs within formal learning environments), occurs implicitly or deliberately, and is an intersubjective process.

The National Research Council (2009) conceptualized informal learning in terms of three lenses and six strands. The three lenses are people-centered, place-centered, and culture-centered. The six strands that the Council proposed for analyzing informal learning include (a) generating interest; (b) understanding conceptual and foundational knowledge; (c) testing ideas and manipulating data; (d) reflecting on the topic; (e) participating in activities related to the topic; and (f) identifying with practitioners in the field. While the Council’s work concerned informal learning related to science, the three lenses and six strands are applicable to other settings. The work described a process that begins with gaining the interest of informal learners to transforming them into practitioners, or at least identifying with practitioners. Transformation is a theme found in both informal learning and Third Space conceptualizations.

There are many different conceptualizations of informal learning. Even the terminology of informal learning causes debate. Eraut (2004) preferred the term non-formal learning, believing that using the term informal learning demeans its usefulness in comparison to formal learning. Billett (2002) suggested that describing workplace learning as informal was misleading; the distinction between formal and informal learning creates a situational determination that makes little sense given learning continuity and social interactions that typically occur within workplace settings. Jarvis (1987) described unplanned and implicit learning as informal learning, and planned
learning (other than formal learning) as non-formal learning. Some theorists have questioned the mechanisms of informal learning. For instance, the value of incidental learning has been questioned, as it could lead learners to misinterpret what they believe they are learning and even be in some instances “miseducative” (Jarvis, 1987, p. 16). Brookfield (1998) expressed concerns about the reliance on sharing experiences often found in adult learning, including informal learning, given that individual experiences may not lead to learning since individual life experiences and the sharing of “war stories” may be rooted in learners’ biases and prejudices. It was Brookfield’s contention that critical reflection upon shared experiences can overcome this potential weakness in experiential learning.

Experiential Learning

Despite concerns that experiential learning may lead to ineffective learning (Brookfield, 1998; Dewey, 1998a; Jarvis, 1987), experiences form the basis of many existing models of informal learning. Quality experiences are essential in learning (Dewey, 1998a) and learner autonomy (Cell, 1984). Learner experiences interact with experiences shared by other learners which then feed further reflections and insights (Davies, 2008; Dewey, 1998a). Informal learners use their own experiences as well as the experiences shared by others as a data gathering experience to benchmark and advance their own learning (Davies, 2008). Experiential learning is not necessarily the same as learning from experience. For Garrick (1998), learning from experiences is implicit and incidental, while experiential learning is a reflective, discursive, intentional, and largely self-directed process.

In a phenomenological study of two Human Resource Development (HRD) specialists developing work-based training programs for construction workers involved with the 2000 summer Olympics, Garrick (1998) discovered that production discourses were pivotal in how informal learning was stimulated. For one of the female participants who lacked a construction background, gaining credibility in and adapting to the industry norms was necessary to overcome initial difficulties in introducing education into a male dominated industry. To adapt, she reframed her past experiences to meet the needs of her industry client, and eventually adopted industry standards in assessment of learning which ran counter to her own professional worldview and previous experiences in the training field. Learners continually frame and revisit their own experiences during
experiential learning (Cell, 1984; Garrick, 1998). Such learners must be able to adjust to dysfunctional situations such as the one in which the HRD specialist had encountered (Cell, 1984). Learners adjust through framing, which reflects their own self-interest; fragmenting, which reflects one’s self interest at the expense of others; or by cynically acknowledging the interests of others while pursuing one’s own interest (Cell, 1984). In Garrick’s study, the HRD specialist reframed her own existing interests through building upon her new experiences in the construction industry. Adjustment to and integration of new experiences through reframing proved to be more critical than maintaining individual autonomy in the case of this HRD specialist.

According to Cell (1984, p. 60), “Experiential learning occurs when direct interaction with our world results in a change in behavior, interpretation, autonomy, or creativity.” He developed a four-phase model to describe how experiential learning occurs in this way. Cell’s (1984) four phases included (a) response learning, (b) situation learning, (c) transsituation learning, and (d) transcendent learning. Response learning occurs when learners change their behavior in response to a situation they encounter based on prior experiences. Situation learning presupposes response learning; it occurs when learners can interpret situations they encounter and vary their responses based on their interpretations. When experiential learners can change their interpretations of situations as a result of reflecting upon their prior experiences, the result is transsituation learning. Transsituation learning empowers learners to be more autonomous. Transcendent learning occurs when learners either modify existing concepts or create new ones based on prior experiences which results in new tools for interpreting situations. It involves a change in learner creativity. Transcendent learning is completed
in groups, since the creation of new concepts requires the existence of social transactions. Throughout Cell’s model, learners reflect on and map their experiences to make better sense of them; these mental maps guide actions and assist learners in forming hypotheses as they encounter different situations (Cell, 1984). This is not an unassailable process, as learners often over-generalize or ignore ideas that have sprung from experiences (Cell, 1984). There are three valuable skills for experiential learners to have: (a) generalization of past experiences, (b) selection of experiences, and (c) interpretation of experiences (Cell, 1984).

In alignment with Cell’s ideas of how learners’ minds map experiences, Malinen (2000) used grounded theory methods to develop her model of adult experiential learning from a comparative analysis of the work of several learning theorists, including Knowles, Kolb, Mezirow, Schön, and Revans. Building on the prior work of these theorists, Malinen (2000) defined adult experiential learning as being (a) retrospective, (b) critical, (c) analytic, (d) rational, (e) personal, and (f) action-oriented. In addition, there are three characteristics of adult experiential learning, including first order experiences based on memories, second order experiences based on reflection, and learner action. Experiential learning is a personal process, although what learners know is mediated by the learners’ “hard core,” consisting of rigid perceptions learners already have, and “protective belt,” representing flexible auxiliary theories and hypotheses (Malinen, 2000, p. 135). Adult experiential learning is therefore a reconstruction of our personal experiential knowing. Social interaction is essential in adult experiential learning; it empowers learners to rethink perceptions of their existing experiences and assess whether the perceived facts are drawn from the learners’ own “hard core” or “protective belt” (Malinen, 2000, p.
The process of experiential learning is both internally held and intersubjective. The distinction between the “hard core” and “protective belt” is important in that it suggests that experiences that spur learning to occur may be both fixed and flexible, a dichotomy that is mediated in the reconstruction of our experiences during the learning process.

Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) is a well-known experiential learning model. The ELC emerged from Kolb’s synthesis of learning theories from Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. Kolb argued that experiential learning is a process rather than an outcome of a process, which differs from the notion of learning as an outcome of an activity-based system (Engestrom, 2001; Sawchuk, 2008). Knowledge and ideas are not fixed; rather, they are constantly evolving through and by the experiences of learners. Experiential learning is therefore an emergent process occurring across space and time that is not dependent upon future knowledge. It is characterized by tension and conflict (Kolb, 1984), two traits also ascribed to Third Space (Eisenhart & Edwards, 2004; English, 2002; Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Moje et al., 2004).

Four interlocking and cyclical phases comprise the ELC: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Kolb described the ELC as reflecting a holistic and adaptive view of human learning, which included thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving. In the ELC, experiences are assessed, reflected upon, and acted upon in an ongoing, never ending cycle. Learning in the ELC is active and self-directed, and both the individual learner and environment are transformed.
Kolb et al. (2002) developed a framework for conversational learning based on the ELC. Conversation is important in that it is through open conversation that learners make sense of their experiences. There were five conversational dialectics that Kolb et al. (2002) described in conjunction with experiential learning. The following ideas comprise the dialectics:

1. Apprehension and comprehension
2. Intension and extension
3. Epistemological discourse and ontological recourse
4. Individuality versus relationality
5. Status and solidarity

Apprehension and comprehension occurs as learners engage in direct perceptions of experiences which are mediated through their own comprehension of the meaning of the experiences. Intension and extension occurs when learners reflect upon their experiences and then transform their reflections into action. Epistemological discourse and ontological recourse comprise the third dialectic. These concepts refer to the linear time that elapses while in conversation and cyclical time, which occurs as learners return to the reoccurring ideas and experiences from the conversations. During epistemological discourse, learners frame their experiences. It is during ontological recourse that learners question assumptions about their experiences, although the authors argued that learners generally stay in the discourse phase without moving into recourse. Questioning one’s own experiences through ontological recourse can be personally transformational and reflects notions of double-loop learning (Argyris, 1982). The fourth dialectic is individuality versus relationality, or what the authors refer to as inside out and outside in.
Conversation is an intersubjective process, in which individuals absorb and connect to the relationships of experiences shared by others, a process the authors refer to as connected knowing. The final dialectic is status and solidarity, or ranking and linking. Learners have an expert ranking in a conversation, and this ranking may shift frequently during a conversation as experiential topics change. Learners are also linked together in an experiential network, and the interplay between ranking and linking is necessary to propel the learner dialogue and learning opportunities forward. The five dialectics described by Kolb et al. (2002) provide a framework for understanding how conversation is a necessary component in experiential learning.

Jarvis (1987) developed his experiential model as a response to the ELC. Although Jarvis based his model on the ELC, he critiqued it as being inadequate in explaining how learning is shaped during the process when learners share experiences. People are a reflection of their own life experiences which are transformed through reflection and then passed on to others through “the social dimension of learning” (Jarvis, 1987, p. 14). Jarvis convened workshops of approximately 200 educators to develop ideas for a new model of experiential learning, using the ELC as the initial focus. Jarvis asked workshop participants to reflect upon the learning process, discuss what they liked and disliked about the ELC model, and formulate their own experiential learning models which were used to formulate a new experiential learning model (Jarvis, 1987). There were nine “routes” in the resulting model which lead to experiential learning. The model itself is hierarchical, beginning with the learner’s presuming experiences, filtering them (accepting some and rejecting others), putting them into practice, committing them to memory, and reflecting upon them (Jarvis, 1987). Jarvis’ model, with its stated goals of
transformation and questioning one’s own beliefs, echoes double loop learning (Argyris, 1982).

**Reflective Learning**

Transforming experiences into learning through reflection characterizes many experiential learning models. Critical reflection spurs learning. Dewey (1998b) formulated five phases of learner reflection: (a) suggestions in experiences, (b) intellectualization of what was experienced into a problem or question, (c) generating a hypothesis, (d) engaging in reasoning, and (e) testing the hypothesis. Experiences once reflected upon generate interest in exploring ideas further and possibly testing those ideas. Although critical of the role experiences play in adult learning, Brookfield (1998) suggested that when experiences are combined with critical reflection through which learners can challenge these experiences through multiple lenses, learning will occur. Critical reflection may be stimulated when learners write autobiographies, analyze experiences through the eyes of students, analyze experiences through the eyes of colleagues, and engage in group reflection (Brookfield, 1998). In its informal learning framework, the National Research Council (2009) included reflection on science concepts and processes as the fourth of the six strands.

In Davies’ (2008) model of experiential learning, expectations interact with learner emotions that have been triggered by prior experiences. Emotions, in turn, interact with learners’ personalities and memories to form reflections that then become a prism through which learners’ experiences and insights stimulate the learning process.
Heuristics emerge from these experiences. Ellström (2006) described reflection that occurs during informal learning as creative developmental informal learning, as opposed to skill-based learning. Adaptive learning begins with reflection and results in routinization, while developmental learning starts with skill-based learning that results in learner reflection (Ellström, 2006). In workplace settings, Ellström (2006) recommended that reflective activities be incorporated in the course of work rather than being treated as a separate activity. He concluded that workplaces generally do not support reflective learning, often pushing time for reflection to activities that occur outside of the workplace.

Schön’s (1988) concept of reflection-in-action is an important consideration in defining how we learn. Reflection-in-action occurs when people think and reflect while they are engaging in an activity; it is a sense of having a feel for something. As with other ideas of informal learning, reflection-in-action is spurred by a surprise or crisis which causes a learner to stop, reflect, experiment with, and act upon the learner’s reflection (Schön, 1988). Reflection-in-action is a developed skill and may be found lacking in professionals who are highly skilled in specific fields, such as law, engineering, or medicine. Practitioners in such fields rely on “technical rationality,” with its heavy dependence on scientific and technical principles that leads to a “narrowness of vision” (Schön, 1988, p. 73). Learners make their own sense of their reflections, and their sense-making is essential to experiential learning, as the reflections themselves are stored in the learners’ bank of experiences, thus allowing learners to draw upon them to influence future actions. Hager (1998) discussed how reflection-in-action has its critics who suggest that stopping for in-depth reflection is not feasible in high-stress
occupations. Schön (1988) held that reflection-in-action is rooted in communities-of-practice as communities make collective sense of experiences, mirroring Mezirow’s (1990) view that transformation through critical reflection occurs in groups. Boud (2006) found that reflection is collective as well, such as what he observed when people were traveling home from work in a carpool or gathered around the office water cooler. Collective reflection is seen in theories of distributed cognition, including Hutchins’ (1995) study of how naval quartermasters engaged in collective sense-making in their work.

Learners may also be encouraged to reflect while working with tools or materials. Bamberger and Schön (1991) studied how people reflect on and “talk back to” materials. They videotaped people making tunes with bells and found that they found new ways of seeing as a result of reflection through the “Piton Effect,” which occurs when the people “pull themselves up to a new view” (Bamberger & Schön, 1991, p. 207).

Reflection occurs in a variety of spaces, even in metaphorical spaces that promote “renewal and development” (Boud, 2006, p. 168). In a two-year study of reflection in workplace learning, Boud (2006) found that much work-related reflection occurred outside of the workplace and without instituting formal activities, such journal keeping. Conversation and reflective practices within the context of work, such as writing professional articles, proved more useful in promoting reflection. Many of the participants in Boud’s (2006, p. 166) study, did not view their own reflective practices as learning and chafed against “formalizing the informal.”
Roles and Identity

Lave and Wenger (1991) originated the idea of “legitimate peripheral participation” in describing how learning occurs within communities that are dedicated to a practice. They stated: “Legitimate peripheral participation is proposed as a descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent,” (p. 35). Legitimate peripheral participation explains how newcomers become full members in a community of practice through apprenticeship. The authors discussed five such communities of practice, including midwives, tailors, meat cutters, quartermasters, and alcoholics. In most of these communities, participation of newcomers was seen as both legitimate and peripheral to full membership, although this was not the case with the meat cutters. The meat cutters had an apprentice program, but what the newcomers learned was not what the experienced meat cutters do but learned other less relevant skills, meaning that what the novices were doing was neither legitimate nor peripheral to the practice of meat cutting (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Situated learning in social practice is central to legitimate peripheral participation and communities-of-practice. Wenger (1998) defined membership in the community as identity as a form of competence that is both familiar and understandable. Social participation among the community members is critical in generating informal learning opportunities. Members are not limited to one role, and encounters in the community are marked by continuous motion and trajectory as well as by continuity and discontinuity in the encounters between newcomers and old timers (Wenger, 1998). In her case study of a manufacturing company, Ellinger (2005, p. 41) found that positive informal learning
opportunities were created in part when participants formed “webs of relationships” that were open to and ready for learning. For Billet (2002), workplace learning arises from participatory social practices and ontogenies (i.e., personal histories) of those who participate in the workplace. Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, and Goldsmith (1995) described a community plane of analysis that focuses on a group of people learning together in an organized activity that is guided by community goals and values. The community plane not only considers interpersonal relationships among members of the community but connections between differing communities as well.

Critics of communities-of-practice believe that it may not provide the strongest framework for understanding how groups learn collectively while engaging in activities. In their qualitative study of wall tiling teachers, educational planners, human resources specialists, and learning outreach professionals, Boud and Middleton (2003) analyzed whether the informal workgroups they formed represented communities-of-practice as narrowly defined by Wenger. They found the workgroups fell short of communities-of-practice as many of the groups did not identify with a specific practice or act as a community-of-interest, although the workgroups did have a distinct identity. Hager and Halliday (2006, p. 196) argued that Wenger focused too much on external objects driving community-of-practices, and that communities-of-practice often result in power imbalances, and that power may “skew the nature of community life.” They further argued that Wenger relied too heavily on describing how communities-of-practice operate, and that terms such as “associations” and “networks” may be a better descriptor for collective learning through practice. In alignment with this critique, Edwards and
Usher (1998) described informal learning as occurring in open spaces characterized by heterogeneous networks rather than tightly-bonded communities.

In a study of universities in the United Kingdom, Whitchurch (2008) developed an identity typology based on unstructured interviews with 24 university professionals working in what he described as a Third Space environment. These identities included (a) bounded professionals, who work within clearly defined job boundaries; (b) cross-boundary professionals, who take strategic advantage of boundaries; (c) unbounded professionals, who ignore boundaries to focus on institutional projects and development; and (d) blended professionals, who cross professional and academic domains. Boundary crossing is a concept associated with Third Spaces and lifelong learning (Glastra, Hake, Meijers, & Schedler, 2001), and Whitchurch’s study demonstrated that certain types of people might be more amenable to interactions in a Third Space, specifically, those who may already be predisposed to engage in a level of hybridity and intersubjectivity in their own professional lives.

**Personal Transformation**

Transformation is an outcome of both informal learning and Third Space. Individual and group transformations are both possible and desired (Jarvis, 1987; Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow (1990) framed transformation as a result of critical reflection that occurs when learning from experience, comparing the process to paradigm shifts. It results in a change in perceptions of the way things are in the world and shifts our world view, as we make meaning from our experiences and the experiences of others. For
Mezirow (1990), transformation may be an individual or group process, citing as examples of group transformation Freire’s learning circles and anti-war movements in the United States. Critical reflection may also result in transformation of an individual’s meaning perspectives, including how a learner uses knowledge, individual epistemic interests and beliefs, and presuppositions that make individuals hesitant to take action (Mezirow, 1990). The idea of having a “space” for critical reflection is important. Kolb et al. (2002) described open conversation spaces as self-organizing systems that provide a continuous process of interaction and transformation that is both open and bounded to the dialectics process that makes up conversations.

Transformation is also critical in the experiential learning models developed by Davies (2008) and Jarvis (1987). Transforming experiences into learning is an adaptable and constantly changing process, and experiential learning models should reflect this flexibility (Davies, 2008). Jarvis (1987) framed experiential learning as learner self-directed and reactive. People learn by reacting to disharmony and life’s changes and transitions (Eraut, 2004; Jarvis, 1987). Reactive learning can lead to a transformation in an individual as well as in groups. Conflict and disorder characterize Third Space as well (Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Gutiérrez et al., 1999).

The theory of double loop learning provides another useful perspective in understanding transformation in Third Space. Double loop learning is learning defined by transformation, free choice, and questioning one’s own existing views and personal theories (Argyris, 1982). Double loop learning is contrasted with single loop learning which is characterized by developing strategies to win, but not change; goal achievement, without questioning the goals themselves; need for control; and risk avoidance (Argyris,
Single loop learning is predominant in most organizations and is how most people are socialized to learn, while double loop learning generally necessitates a designed learning environment, referred to as Model II (Argyris, 1982). Single loop learning, as typified in Model I environments, leads to double binds, in which the rules are never fully examined or even discussed freely by learners (Argyris, 1982). Model II learning environments break down these double binds by encouraging questioning of rules, confronting one’s own views, and testing of personal theories. Model II environments are also transformational. Double loop learning encourages individual and group transformation by changing governing values and theories-in-use that people use (Argyris, 1982). With its transformational quality in which existing rules are open to constant questioning and multiple perspectives are integrated, Third Spaces may be envisioned as a type of Model II environment.

Third Space theories, particularly cultural hybridity and Thirding-as-Othering, and informal learning theories provide a strong basis for understanding the conceptual framework that I have developed for my study. The existence of favorable conditions to the emergence of a Third Space reflects notions of learning, including experiential, reflective, and transformational learning.
Chapter 3

Methods

Research Setting

My study’s settings were two discussion groups that are hosted by a membership organization in a northeastern city in the United States. There were a total of 53 study participants between the two discussion groups. One group was dedicated to discussion of issues of interest to government employees, while the other was concerned with organizational coaching skills. Both groups met monthly to discuss a range of topics concerning government and coaching issues. The membership organization sponsors several discussion groups, several of which meet face-to-face, with some meeting virtually online using web conferencing. Both groups permitted all interested participants to attend meetings, including non-members of the host membership organization. The number of participants at each meeting varied with interest in the monthly topics. Group membership was comprised of both regulars who generally attended each month and occasional participants. Both groups had a leader who selected discussion topics, arranged for presenters, and moderated the discussions.

These two groups provided a purposeful sample for my study. They exhibited the characteristics needed to investigate informal learning in Third Space and address my study’s research problem and questions. These topics covered by the groups were related to workplace issues and many of the attendees worked in my field of interest. The groups
did not constitute a workplace setting; rather, they operated at the boundaries of workplaces. Participants came from the private sector, non-profit organizations, consulting, and government. These kinds of topic-driven discussion groups provided a setting where experiential learning occurred and have long been considered a fertile source of informal learning opportunities (Knowles, 1950). For these reasons, I selected these two discussion groups as the sample for my study. I specifically selected the government and coaching discussion groups because of specific favorable characteristics—they both met face-to-face and were led by individuals who supported my research goals.

**Research Design**

My qualitative research design was ethnographic, and I incorporated the use of video research methods. Ethnography is the study of cultural patterns of people and places in their natural settings as a way of understanding the phenomenon of interest, in the case of my study informal learning in Third Space environments (Cresswell, 2009; Fetterman, 1989; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Wolcott, 2008). Ethnography provides a method for better understanding the levels of social organization, including roles and identities of group members and participants, providing a way of looking at and seeing these relationships (Wolcott, 2008). In my study, I was not only interested in the cultural patterns that exist among Third Space participants, but also in the values and social actions participants take; for instance, whether participants reflect and act upon experiences shared in their interactions with others (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).
Ethnography enabled me to better understand the nature of the Third Space itself, including my interest in whether Third Space is a primarily a group phenomenon or individually constructed. The key to understanding this lies in how the social patterns of the groups emerged. My use of ethnographic research methods led me to a greater understanding of these social patterns. Given the metaphorical nature of Third Space, I attempted to provide a thick description of the findings from an emic point-of-view. Use of ethnographic research methods proved useful to me in meeting this research goal.

I incorporated video research methods in this study, which proved invaluable to me in analyzing participant observations. Use of video provides researchers with an especially rich corpus of data for analysis that can be analyzed over time (Lemke, 2007). Barron (2007) described the value of using video to analyze data in face-to-face interactions to better understand the context of behavior found in small group settings. Use of video provides the ability to conduct interaction analysis which attempts to “identify regularities in the way participants utilize the resources of the complex social and material world of actors and objects within which they operate” (Jordan & Henderson, 1995, pg. 41). Interaction analysis using video as the recorder of interactivity and intersubjectivity of the groups enabled me to better understand the cultural patterns of interaction.

Incorporating ethnographic and video research methods provided an efficient combination in analyzing the collected data. I believe it provided the best research approach to understanding the phenomenon of Third Space.
Data Gathering Methods

I incorporated various ethnographic methods in collecting data for this study.

Table 3.1 summarizes the methods I used and describes how they were used to address the study’s three research questions.

Table 3.1. Study Research Questions and Corresponding Data Collection Methods.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Collection Methods</th>
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| What are the cultural patterns of interaction that reflect Third Space characteristics in professional discussion groups? | • Participant observation using video analysis  
• Field notes  
• Document analysis |
| What role do funds of knowledge and sharing experiences play in group discussions? | • Ethnographic interviewing  
• Participant observation using video analysis  
• Field notes |
| How do discussion group participants make sense of the discussions?              | • Ethnographic interviewing  
• Participant observation using video analysis  
• Field notes |

Participant observation and fieldwork are critical methods in ethnographic studies. The intention in observing participants in their natural settings is to learn more about the actions of participants and make sense of those actions (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). My role as researcher in the group was to be as unobtrusive as possible. Rather than operating as a detached observer, I participated in discussions when I found it advantageous to gain information and better understand the emic view. I believe this also allowed me to be better accepted by group participants, although, as I expected, participants were well aware of my researcher role, conforming to the participant observer role described by Fetterman (1989). Wolcott (2008) advised ethnographic
observers to participate cautiously and only when it is necessary to gain information. I
took detailed field notes of my observations; even as I video recorded most of the
meetings I attended. There were two coaching group meetings that I did not video or
audio record and relied on field notes to document observations. I followed the
suggestions of Rossman and Rallis (2003) who suggested that field notes should fully
describe the following about the setting: where, who, what, when, and why. I entered my
field notes into NVivo qualitative software for coding and data analysis.

Observations of the face-to-face meetings were video recorded when agreed to by
the meeting presenters. If I did not have prior approval to video record from the
meeting’s scheduled presenter, I took field notes instead. This occurred twice with
coaching group meetings. Participants and presenters were provided a video release
statement to sign as part of the informed consent process before each meeting. I used one
stationary video camera and positioned it using a wide lens to capture as much participant
discussion as possible as suggested by Hall (2007). I commenced recording before the
beginning of the meeting as participants were arriving and continued the recording
through the end of the discussion. I allowed any participant to request video recording to
cease at any time for any reason. I was never asked to stop recording. I also audio
recorded meetings to serve as a back-up recording in case the microphone attached to the
video camera failed to properly record audio.

Participant interviews were the second primary method I used in the study. I used
interviews in this study as a method to build upon data that I observed. My interests
included exploring how participants use experiences gleaned from participating in the
discussion groups, and interviews are the most feasible method to uncover this
information. I used a semi-structured interview process that drew on elements of ethnographic interviewing as recommended by Rossman and Rallis (2003) and Rubin and Rubin (2005). My interview guide is found in the Appendix. The interview questions were open ended and conformed to the nature of qualitative interviews as described by Rubin and Rubin (2005). Due to the busy schedules of the participants, all of the interviews were conducted through Skype using the program Pamela to record the calls with the full permission of the interview participants. In one interview, Skype failed to work properly, so the interview was conducted with a mobile phone. I took extensive notes throughout the interview and engaged in member checking the accuracy of the notes with the participant. I transcribed the recorded interviews using NVivo qualitative software. Participants were recruited to participate in interviews, and I focused on conducting in-depth interviews with a small group of participants, focusing on regular participants. I interviewed three long-time group participants and one relative newcomer. The interviews ranged in length from 25 to 45 minutes and transcriptions were provided to all the participants so they could member check the accuracy of the interviews if they chose too. I believe these interviews provided me with a deep understanding of participant views.

I incorporated document analysis as a third data collection source. This data collection method was far less critical than participant observations and interviews, due to the fact that documents were less available given the nature of the group meetings. Certain documents did prove useful in my data analysis, including presentation materials and other documentation regarding the groups, such as guidelines or charters and
marketing materials. When it was feasible, I loaded the documentation into NVivo for coding and analysis.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

My data analysis was pre-figured and emergent. I kept a journal and wrote several analytical memoranda throughout the data collection process. My analysis focused on the Third Space conceptual framework and three research questions, although I kept an open mind and modified data gathering processes as I proceeded with the study. My data analysis took on a holistic form as defined by Rossman and Rallis (2003, pg. 274) as strategies that “describe connections among the data in the actual context—a place, an event, a person’s experience, a text.” My research objective was to describe the culture of a Third Space learning environment, not necessarily compare and contrast environments, an objective that would benefit from a categorical data analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). My data analysis was not rigidly fixed. I conducted categorical analysis on the corpus of data, particularly with regard to my initial prefigured coding schemes, by engaging in open coding. As a result, the final codes and categories differed from the prefigured coding scheme.

Another aspect of my data analysis involved the video corpus of data. Video created an extensive amount of data that necessitated specific technical approaches to analyzing the data. In addition to reviewing the video contents, I engaged other analytical approaches. Barron and Engle (2007) described the specific types of analysis one can conduct with video: “play-by-play” and coding, counting, and statistical analysis.
Play-by-play involves a sequential description of interactions that occur over time, while coding, counting, and statistical analysis is based on disciplined observation, in which the researcher strives to document findings in a scientific manner that can be compared using inter-rater analysis (Barron & Engle, 2007). Many video studies incorporate selected elements of both of these methods. Ash (2007, pg. 212) provided a structure for analysis of video of informal learning environments, given that these environments are often characterized by “disconnected dialogical events.” The structure she developed contains three levels of analysis: (a) a holistic level referred to as the flow chart, (b) isolation of significant events, and (c) dialogic analysis of specific chosen segments which address the research questions (Ash, 2007). I used Ash’s three levels of analysis to analyze the collected video corpus of data.

I developed prefigured coding categories based on the conceptual framework and research questions. During the initial open and focused coding I performed on the corpus of data, I modified several of these codes or determined them to be irrelevant based on what I uncovered during the data analysis. The codes and resulting categories that emerged from my data analysis efforts are found in Chapter 4. The prefigured scheme was useful in providing me with an initial benchmark for my data analysis efforts. However, as I was to discover during my initial coding, the prefigured coding scheme did not necessarily correspond to what I ultimately determined was the most salient codes. I did not limit myself to the prefigured coding scheme during my data analysis. Table 3.2 provides the focusing questions that I considered and a list of prefigured codes designed to address the questions.
Table 3.2. Focusing Questions and Prefigured Codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focusing Questions</th>
<th>Prefigured Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What experiences do participants share in group discussions?</td>
<td>Own professional experiences&lt;br&gt;Own personal experiences&lt;br&gt;Experiences of others&lt;br&gt;Positive experiences&lt;br&gt;Neutral experiences&lt;br&gt;Negative experiences&lt;br&gt;Experiences with people&lt;br&gt;Experiences with environment&lt;br&gt;Experiences with processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do participants react to experiences shared by other group members?</td>
<td>Express that they have had similar experiences&lt;br&gt;Express that they have not had similar experiences&lt;br&gt;Express positive views about experiences shared by others&lt;br&gt;Express negative views about experiences shared by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do participants transform experiences?</td>
<td>Experiment based on experience; do not adopt change&lt;br&gt;Experiment based on experience; adopt change&lt;br&gt;Adopt change without experimentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do values and presuppositions transform as a result of participation in the group?</td>
<td>Reflect on an opposing value; do not cross boundaries&lt;br&gt;Reflect on an opposing value; cross boundaries&lt;br&gt;Reflect on one’s own presuppositions; do not cross boundaries&lt;br&gt;Reflect on one’s own presuppositions; cross boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is a participant’s role within the group?</td>
<td>Newcomer (member of group less than 3 months)&lt;br&gt;Peripheral member (member of group at least 3 months but less than 8 months)&lt;br&gt;Full member (member of group for 8 months or more)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does a participant gain from participation in group?</td>
<td>Imagining new perspectives&lt;br&gt;Feelings of autonomy/Self-determination&lt;br&gt;Reframing of perspectives&lt;br&gt;Adopting a group cultural norm&lt;br&gt;Integrating group perspectives&lt;br&gt;Adopting others’ lessons learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What transformations do participants undergo as a result of their participation in the group?</td>
<td>Perspective transformation&lt;br&gt;Question own presuppositions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I assigned open codes, and new categories emerged as I analyzed the corpus of data. I incorporated grounded theory analysis methods such as axial coding and constant comparative analysis to identify emergent categories and sub-categories as suggested by Charmaz (2006). In addition, when appropriate, I incorporated theoretical sampling techniques to uncover additional information on emerging categories and the development of sub-categories. Such analysis techniques enabled me to provide a thick description of Third Space informal learning environments.

**Trustworthiness**

Rossman and Rallis (2003) enumerated several steps that researchers should take to ensure that their data analysis is trustworthy. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of my data analysis and findings, I integrated three steps described by Rossman and Rallis. First, given that this is an ethnographic study, I engaged with the participants at the site over a prolonged period time—nearly a year of observation in the field. Second, I have built into my research analysis triangulation by incorporating multiple data sources and data methods. Third, I employed member-checking procedures to verify what I saw in emerging data with those participants I interviewed.

**Personal Biography**

In addition to being a graduate student, I have worked for a government agency for over 24 years, 18 of which has been involved with training and instructional design.
For the past 7 years, I have worked in the agency’s corporate university as an instructional designer among other responsibilities. I have also been, at times, a member of the professional organization that served as the setting for the study and have actively participated in one of its discussion groups as a participant and presenter. Part of my interest in the topic of this study is based on my prior experiences with discussion groups as well as my interest in informal learning as an alternative to formal learning experiences in workplace settings and among adult learners.

**Ethical and Political Considerations**

This study was undertaken with Penn State University Institutional Review Board approval and consent was required of all participants. I protected the confidentiality of those who consented to participate in the observed group meetings. I understood that things participants may have said or did in these meetings may have been sensitive with regard to their careers. In addition, I realized the use of video recording increased the sensitivity that was required of me as a researcher to protect the identities of all participants to the greatest extent possible.
Chapter 4

Results

I confess to finding Third Space a challenge—it is metaphorical and hard to pin down. Conceptions of Third Space vary. Scholars and philosophers have disagreed over its definition and meaning. Is Third Space about spatial relationships—the Trialectics of Spatiality discussed by Soja (1996, 2009) and defined by Lefebvre (1991)? Or is it a space for enunciation of differences (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 2009)? Does it empower the marginalized (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 2009)? Is it a hybrid space for a new culture to incubate and emerge (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 2009)? Or is it all of these things and perhaps more?

Something I read recently provided me with additional perspective on Third Space. A chain bookseller in the Georgetown area of Washington, D.C. had closed, and the article lamented the loss of an area Third Place. The cavernous, three-story store served other purposes besides that of selling books. It was a coffee house. It was as a refuge from winter cold and summer heat. It served as a study hall for university students. Through the years, I had often stopped in to browse the books or magazine shelves, drink coffee or hot chocolate, or get off the hectic Georgetown streets for a quiet respite. In retrospect, I realize how infrequently I purchased books there. Yet I was often drawn there whenever I visited Georgetown. As I read the article, it became apparent to me that the bookstore had *transcended* its ostensible purpose transforming the space into much more than a bookseller. The store had transformed into a Third Space.
I set out to explore whether the groups investigated in this study transcended their ostensible purposes and became a Third Space that fostered informal learning. Both groups featured presenters who spoke on a variety of topics and opportunities to network with other professionals. Some presenters were insiders, while others were drawn from outside the groups. Presenters were critical to the groups; indeed, presentations were promoted by the host organization as a major benefit of group membership. But do these groups serve another less explicit purpose? Do they give voice to marginalized workers? Does a bringing together of professionals from different backgrounds and workplaces create a hybrid space, and, as Bhabha (1994) theorized, a new location for culture—perhaps a new workplace culture?

My research focused on developing a better understanding of the culture of the groups through a Third Space conceptual lens from an ethnographic perspective and an emic point-of-view. In fact, I had been an “insider” with the government group for many years and had presented on numerous occasions.

My research questions were:

4. What are the cultural patterns of interaction that reflect Third Space characteristics in professional discussion groups?

5. What role do funds of knowledge and sharing experiences play in group discussions?

6. How do discussion group participants make sense of the discussions?
Patterns of Interaction in the Discussion Groups

Working from these research questions and my conceptual framework, I coded my three primary data sources line-by-line. My data sources included (a) video recorded observations of significant events from group meetings, (b) field notes, and (c) open-ended qualitative interviews with selected participants. In the findings, I have used pseudonyms for all participants that are referenced. After open coding the corpus of data, I used focused coding techniques to develop categories describing the patterns that I uncovered across the corpus of data. I used constant comparative analysis techniques across the data sources in an effort to triangulate the data. Table 4.1 contains the initial open codes that I generated from the data with the number of instances of the codes that I discovered across the three data sources.

Table 4.1. Initial Open Codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applying learning</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being influenced by others</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building community</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying a point</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing experiences</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in counterscript</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing acceptance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing agreement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing an opinion</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing difference</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing disagreement</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing energy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing surprise</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing unease</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing others</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning something</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering information</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2 contains the four major categories that emerged through focused coding techniques. I refined the initial coding and then grouped into the four categories that I observed. These categories were applied to large sections of corpus of data and, taken collectively, represent my conceptualization of a Third Space as it applies to the groups in my study. As I undertook focused coding, I revisited and redefined some of the codes that I had initially assigned. In other instances, I aggregated initial codes into new codes for classification within the four categories. I have provided the instances of codes to express the breadth of the existence of the ideas that were observed.

Table 4.2. Third Space Categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safe Space</td>
<td>Expressing opinions</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing disagreement</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging in counterscript</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Space</td>
<td>Knowing others</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing identity</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community building</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential Space</td>
<td>Being influenced by others</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging in experiential learning</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contributing experiences</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Space</td>
<td>Using information</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflecting on discussions</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proposing solutions</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The four categories in Table 4.2 established a conceptual framework for study of the groups and represent a conceptualization of Third Space learning environments. These four categories are represented in my findings and are also linked to my three research questions and Third Space conceptual frameworks.

The four spaces are interconnected and do not reflect well-defined boundaries. The idea of the safety for participants to engage in frank discussion away from their workplaces led them to freely engage in experience and information sharing. The fact that the group members are interacting in a social space leads to increased feelings of safety among its participants.

**Description of the Coaching Discussion Group**

The coaching group met in the evening, after work, in a regional library meeting room. The meeting began promptly at 7:00 p.m. and lasted two hours. The leader would set up the chairs in a semi-circle so all attendees were facing each other. He would sit at the front of the room with the evening's presenter. The presentations were related to coaching and most of the attendees, especially the regulars, are professional coaches. Some were coaches with many years of experience, while others were new to coaching. One participant was a recent government retiree with nearly thirty-five years of experience who had just become certified as a coach and was beginning a new career in coaching.

In this group, many of the "old timers" were good friends and the group reflected a supportive, holistic environment. Newcomers were welcomed. A number of the
newcomers were interested in coaching but were not coaches themselves. Some old timers brought friends with them. Many participants arrived early to the meetings and socialized with one another well before the seven o’clock start. People were friendly with one another, so much so sometimes the presentations and discussions took a back seat to the connections that were forged between attendees.

The leader was instrumental in nurturing the supportive environment. At the beginning of each meeting, he would always emphasize the three objectives of the meetings: learning, growth, and community. Community occurred in the beginning with introductions and at the end with thirty minutes of networking time. Often in the introductions, there was resource sharing, for instance an attendee might share information on a new coaching program or a job opportunity. Anecdotes and information were often shared during introductions. One long time attendee even brought promotional hand sanitizers to hand out to attendees. In between introductions at the beginning and at the end of the meeting, there was learning on a topic related to coaching or of interest to coaches. Topics revolved around resources and tools that coaches could use or explorations of leadership development.

Presenters involved the participants with a learning activity. Sometimes these activities involved reorganizing the seating arrangements from the semi-circle, so small groups could work together more closely on the learning activities. The number of attendees in each group varied from meeting-to-meeting. Learning activities spurred interaction among the attendees. I learned a great deal from sharing experiences and insights with other participants. After the activity, the groups would break up and regroup into the semi-circle for debriefing.
The public library where the group met officially closed at 8:00 p.m. although we were able to stay until 9:00 p.m. (the leader rented the meeting room). We would always be interrupted by the library's public address system at 8:00 p.m. asking everyone to leave provoking knowing laughter from the leader and participants.

At the first meeting that I attended, the last thirty minutes of community time were devoted to remembering a long time member of the group who had recently died. It was an intensely emotional moment that for me underscored the importance of the social space that the group had become.

The last coaching group meeting I attended was interesting. The topic was creative ways of dealing with stress relief as a coach. One of the presenters urged participants to stand up and envision a problem they were facing. Then the presenter encouraged attendees to move their body parts in certain ways, such as shaking and arm or a leg to release the stress. Some attendees got into the spirit of the activity, while others appeared to be a bit more reticent. The coaching group tended to be more experimental than the government group in this regard.

Community time after the presentations offered attendees a chance to interact for the last 30 minutes. At most meetings roughly half of the participants stayed to chat and network. Several participants asked me about my research at this time. At the end of the meeting, some participants would assist the leader in stacking the chairs against the wall.
Description of the Government Discussion Group

The government discussion group operated differently. The group met in different rooms of a conference center. The seating arrangements were usually the same for all of the events—a U-shaped table. Interestingly, the seating arrangement was similar to that of the coaching group, although with the addition of tables. Tables were rarely used in the coaching group, although for one meeting side tables were moved to the center of the room for a group learning activity.

Another difference between the groups was there was less sense of sustained community in the government group. Although there were some people who attended more than one meeting there was not the long term core of attendees that the coaching group had. There was little time allocated for networking opportunities. The meetings were held during the lunch hour on work days as opposed to after work as had been the case in the coaching meetings. Attendees tended to arrive close to the start time and leave soon thereafter, not surprising given the fact that they had to get back to work. The meetings usually lasted about 1.5 hours. Participants were often a mix of government employees and contractors who do business with the government. Likewise, presenters were often consultants or government employees. Most of the presenters projected PowerPoint slides. This differed from the coaching group where PowerPoint slide shows and projectors were never used.

Central to the government meetings was the presentation—topics were wide ranging and did not focus on a single area such as coaching. Attendance varied from 25 to 30 people, although on one occasion only three participants attended due to bad
weather. The group leader, Stan, would introduce the presenter at the beginning of the meeting.

The government group was characterized by presentation-based information sharing, although there were also many vibrant discussions. For instance, there was a meeting dedicated to mentoring in the government, in which many agencies shared what they were doing with regard to mentoring, sharing their experiences, expressing difficulties with their agencies, regarding budget, culture, among other things. In this group, attendees often openly expressed frustrations with their workplace. Openly expressed frustrations were more evident in this group than in the coaching group. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that many of the coaching group participants were self-employed consultants who generally did not work for organizations.

Abby was a relative newcomer to the government group when I met her. I conducted an interview with her to gain her perspective on the group. Abby began attending the group meetings because she was interested in making a career change from managing health programs to training and development. She thought the group would provide her with a venue for networking with professionals who work in the training area. She attended three or four meetings since that time and enjoyed attending the meetings but the meeting times during lunch hours led to a “hurried” feeling that had not allowed for much professional networking which was her original motivation for attending the meetings.

Abby chose meetings to attend that interested her or met her professional needs and network with like-minded professionals. She particularly liked two meetings on improving presentation skills, which she viewed as relevant to reaching her own career
goals. We were once paired on in a presentation exercise where we were to share an upcoming presentation for which we were preparing. I discovered during the exercise that she had just begun presenting topics in her agency and enjoyed it. She was interested in transitioning her career as a program manager and hoped she could learn more, as well as network, about the training and development field, since there was no one at her workplace to turn to for guidance or inspiration.

After the meeting, Abby stayed in close touch with the presenter, a public speaking consultant who had inspired Abby to continue improving her presentation skills. I was able to provide Abby information on the training field as well as advise her on making a mid-career shift. Participation in the group motivated her and provided a space away from her agency to explore a possible career change. Abby recently changed jobs and is now working in training and development full-time has begun a certificate program in instructional systems development with a local university. She credited the group as serving as a bridge both for information and a space for expressing her interests in career change and personal transformation.

A Safe Space

The coaching and government groups provided space to express opinions and disagreement with presenters and fellow participants. Participants could joke and complain about employers or organizations that they were involved with presently or in the past. These comments often occurred before the meetings as small talk between participants or during the meeting as a result of the meeting’s discussion topics. Laughter
would result from an impertinent remark and participants would debate topics.

Participant conflict, when it reared itself, occurred in an atmosphere of support and respect.

In forming the government group a few years before, Stan wanted to create a space where participants could learn and freely communicate with one another. He described the importance of safety in the group:

I think that is really important and I really try to foster that people can come in a safe place—you know we talk about coaching, or we can talk about social bullying, or we can talk about age discrimination, we've had that; we've talked about those kinds of things, those issues. So I think people feel comfortable raising significant, sensitive issues. You know, I think sometimes since we have people from varied [organizations] it's a place they can go and no colleagues from their own agencies are going to hear them, or their boss, or a subordinate isn't going to hear them, so they feel more relaxed and more in a safe place to express questions, doubts, concerns, and ideas—it's a place to ask a question where they think in the workplace is a dumb question and don't feel comfortable asking, but here they do.

David was a participant in the government group. When I asked him about whether safety is a part of the group experience, he reflected on the idea:

I think so, and I also get that impression from the other participants that they also, especially since the meetings are off their worksite that they are sometimes more willing to open up the frustrations they have in their workplaces.
David also liked that the government group provided a space where he could learn about and discuss managerial topics that were not usually discussed in his own organization. Effective management practices were not priority:

That’s sort of in conflict with what primarily the motivation of my co-workers at [David’s organization] that I feel they are more academically motivated that they are more primarily interested in the mechanics of economic or statistical development rather than managerial or educational or training development.

Jill is a long-time participant in the coaching group and a professional coach. She would eventually become the leader of the group taking over when the previous leader stepped down. The group provided her with a different experience from her relationship with her coaching clients and provided a space to discuss topics in the field. For Jill, the group meetings provided a space for open exploration, reflecting Third Space as a “Thirding-as-Othering” space (Soja, 1996, 2009). Jill’s coaching style differed from some of the other coaching group participants. Jill incorporates unconventional techniques in her coaching services. Despite these differences, her relationship with her fellow participants was as close and safe as the relationship she has with her clients:

I have a different relationship with these people, so it's just during the time we are engaged in a professional relationship with me being their coach and I have access to that, but sometimes it continues after, but it’s very intimate, but I miss that intimacy, but in the group I don't quite go to that level, unless occasionally I've had things slip out of my mouth that I didn't intend to say.

Bhabha (1994) summarized third spaces as places for enunciation of differences where the marginal have a voice and where a new culture could emerge from such
enunciation. Both groups provided space for participants to feel comfortable to express frustrations and question their own organizations or clients. Matt, a performance consultant, was presenting to the government group on using databases to evaluate programs and improve performance. Wilma was a government employee. Before the presentation began, Matt engaged in small talk with early arriving participants, including Wilma. The discussion focused on his discussion topic about which Matt was passionate. The following was an interaction between Matt and Wilma:

Matt: As a [organization] employee, I used to see training is used to send people away somewhere away from the office, and of course that is a bad tendency.

Wilma: They'll say training will fix it and they will not analyze what the real issue is—what's the problem.

Wilma was referring to the shortcomings of her organization’s leaders. While Matt’s presentation had little to do directly with training, his discussion topic, using large databases to enhance program evaluation, sparked their conversation. I sensed frustration in Wilma’s voice as she and Matt discussed her workplace situation. In his presentation, Matt related information on an organization’s indifference to budget considerations regarding the need for rigorous evaluation. He promoted improving performance in organizations through use of data and related an aside that resonated with many of the participants in the room:

One agency, not represented in this room, said to me, you know we are like a teenager with a gold credit card, you know we don't care about measurement because we don't need to care about measurement—today is a different situation.
I believe Matt’s conversation with Wilma regarding her experiences may have encouraged Matt to relate this particular experience before the larger group of participants.

Having a space to openly challenge workplace norms benefited participants. Participation empowered David to introduce new ideas to his agency by writing a sometimes tongue-in-cheek summary of the meetings for his manager and co-workers that informed his readers. David also indicated another motive:

Yeah, you'll recall that's the thing that I wrote had a rather sarcastic beginning on that, do you want to work in a highly efficient workplace, etc. etc. Well, lots of luck getting that to occur. Then you could create your own high motivation area, your own Gilligan's Island of excellence. I think that was a little reflected in what I had written—I would say so.

The group meetings provided David with a voice as he transformed what he learned in the meetings into a critique of his agency’s culture through his meeting summaries. David’s summaries were popular with his co-workers, even with his supervisor, who occasionally edited out some of the more barbed comments. Some of the summaries were even included in an office-wide newsletter. Through his written summaries, David encouraged his supervisor and co-workers to reflect upon difficult workplace cultural issues. The discussion provided David with a springboard for ideas to diffuse within his work space. He would always take copious notes and would relate an experience or provide information but rarely offered strong opinions regarding his own work experiences. On occasion he expressed opinions during discussions. He described the topics he opined on:
The problems with management. The often times failure of management to either take into account the knowledge and background of their technical staff, the people who have worked in this area for years, how often they are dismissive of the experiences and the new creative ideas that their staff often comes up with. I've mentioned that a couple of times and it's not something I would like to talk about very much in the workplace itself. It would probably be taken the wrong way, even if I meant it in a constructive manner.

Rather than expressing these opinions in his office, David found a way of expressing it through his written summaries. The government group provided him with space to open up and reflect upon his own feelings. He could then disseminate his ideas while transforming himself and his agency.

The groups contributed to transformation through learning for other participants. Stan described how discussions transformed his thinking about the topic of social bullying in workplaces:

You know I think one thing is—social bullying, the prevalence of it and the various types of social bullying they are things, when you reflect on it. You start to realize that really is aggressive behavior and it can manifest itself in a lot of different ways. I don't know if it changed any of my assumptions, but it definitely did make me pause and think about different types of human behavior and the motivations behind the actions.

The group served as a space for participants to express frustrations with their managers. In the government group, the exchange between Joan, a government
employee, and Fred, a leadership development consultant and regular group participant reflected this frustration:

Joan: I'm working with somebody now who's higher than me—she's really shift [sic] away from her personal strengths and it's taken its toll because she's had to shift away. Do I say no or move myself?

Fred: You have to have values so you don't roll over and play dead.

I define counterscript as joking, irreverent or even rude dialogue from participants. It is distinct from participants expressing different opinions on a topic. The relationship between the group attendees and presenters created opportunities for jokes and occasionally barbs. Exchanges were ordinarily good natured but sometimes they were not. A group might even turn against a presenter. Jill recalled an instance in which the coaching group presenters were not well-received:

If you had no sound and just watched them they were dated in terms of the clothes they had on like maybe 15 to 20 years, they would have been in style so their clothes were dated and their physical presence was disturbing in front of the group, when she sat and he stood in the background he had a huge belly like he was going to have a baby, and she was the presenter and, whenever he felt like, he would start talking over her, and he said we do this all the time, it's how we work, and we've done a lot of work for [organization], and it's just our style, but it was so disturbing and arrogant and then what they were saying was really dated so there was a congruence but not in the way you wanted and the group as tactfully as they could challenge them the entire time, and that was one of the times I felt the clock was not working.
What was surprising about Jill’s reflection was that my own observation that the coaching group was very supportive of one another and of presenters. Jill conceded that the topics that were presented were interesting and the information provided “stellar,” but when faced with presenters who did not interact well with the tight knit group, the participants rebelled. Jill’s perception was that the presenters were outsiders and she had never seen them attend a meeting. According to Jill, other participants shared her feelings:

All the body language was negative and nobody was with them and it started out people were looking forward to it, it sounded like it was going to be great presentation, but I was just looking at them—ok, so let's just disregard the clothes no one wears those kinds of clothes anymore, but let's just disregard that—and then after a while it was nope.

Gutiérrez, et al. (1995) and Gutiérrez, et al. (1997, 1999) conceptualized third spaces as learning environments where participants could freely engage in counterscript, dialogue that may seem on the surface to be irreverent and even rude but in reality is highly relevant for expanding the scope of the discussion and promoting learning opportunities. The government and coaching groups provided a space for occasionally irreverent and sarcastic comments that evolved into learning opportunities. Politics is a sensitive topic for many and people are often guarded in espousing their political beliefs. On an election night, the coaching group was meeting and one of the longtime members during introductions asked whether everyone had gone out to vote and mentioned that she had been working polling locations for the county’s Democratic Party organization. A longtime member retorted that he found it interesting that she was a Democrat. She
asked why. He said, with a wide grin, because she was “so sensible” and the group, including the woman, laughed.

In addition, during a coaching group discussion of leadership development stages, several participants offered critical comments about people they had worked with regarding the stages of development. Counterscript remarks led to a discussion in which many experiences among the participants were shared and reflected upon.

This exchange between Helen, who was presenting on leadership skills at a government group meeting, and Ted exemplified a counterscript exchange that contained a serious undercurrent:

Helen: Do you have one difficult person in your office?

Ted: Is it okay if we have two?

Several participants laughed and nodded at the exchange. While Ted’s comment was taken in jest by participants, it also resonated with many of them who had worked with difficult people at some point in their careers. Opportunities to engage in counterscript within the group moved the discussions along. Matt, the presenter on using evaluation databases in the government group, engaged in counterscript that resulted in laughter among the participants. He said, “Anyone here on Twitter? Anyone tweet? Everyone know what a blunt is?” Matt’s question, while tongue-in-cheek, served a serious purpose— he was describing how police in a major city were monitoring social media and captured a drug dealer who was using Twitter to advertise his drug sales locations. Matt’s purpose was to demonstrate how policing had been transformed by using data and social media.
In another interaction from the same discussion, a participant, Edward used the introduction period to promote a book he had recently written as well as his consulting services. While Edward acknowledged he might be engaging in counterscript by being “brazen,” his comment did trigger an interesting exchange of information regarding the rigor of methodology in the developing world with Matt, the meeting presenter:

Edward: If I can be brazen, I have a book out called [book title] for improving results and it's kind of endorsed by PMI, Project Management Institute, so it’s got some credentials…what I'm looking for is to gain some visibility so I can stay here instead of leaving the country as frequently as I do, so if any of you want a free presentation on methodologies to develop metrics across all functions at any level where everyone is using the same methodology to develop metrics so you can have apples to apples to apples—that's a trite metaphor—so I'd be happy to help anyone to see how I might complement your approach.

Matt: So you've been overseas for a long time?

Edward: Yes, in Africa, where they don't have the rigor that I'd like to get into.

Matt: Oh Ok—that's interesting, so less rigor over there you think?

Edward: Oh yeah—not Europe but certainly in international development, in the developing world, certainly where I work in.

Sense-Making in the Professional Discussion Groups

While most interactions were not confrontational, participants in both groups challenged presenters and each other. Consider the following exchange from a
government group meeting on leadership development. Helen, a management consultant, was one of the two presenters. She was presenting on the idea of creating “customer delight,” and she differentiated between employees who are committed and those who are engaged. As an example, she cited employees who would show up to work during a snowstorm as having a higher level of engagement than an employee who may be willing to miss a child’s soccer game. Matt, a participant in this meeting, challenged Helen on the distinction:

Matt: I just didn't understand what's the difference. If you're willing to show up during a snowstorm, what's the difference from skipping a soccer game, it seems the same.

Helen: Commitment is I have a work ethic, I know that I need to show up, I need to be present, I need to do my work, I've been hired to do a job, are you committed? I will do that. But engagement has the heart. Commitment is on a more rational side, but I consider engagement, true engagement, my passion, my pride, my professional, is I will be here because I want you, my manager, to be the best I can be, and I will fully engage myself in this discretionary effort. That is how I define it.

Matt’s questioning the meaning of the word commitment continued with Fred, the other presenter. Fred described compliance as the opposite of commitment:

Matt: I don't understand why the opposite of commitment is compliance.

Fred: Compliance here means emotional compliance, bare bones.

Matt: I find it a peculiar word, but I see.
The term *commitment* sparked a discussion in which participants had questioned the presenters underlying conceptions of the word’s meaning and attempted to unpack its meaning through dialogue. Although the exchange focused on the specific word, it also underscored discomfort with a theme of the presenters—a committed employee does not ensure excellent customer service. As discussion of the word by the group continued, another attendee, Mary, described the lack of commitment she saw in the leaders of her organization:

What I found it's a broken group that's on a climate of mistrust because of a leader that is no longer there, and we have a great new leader, but what I find is that is that all these people, they do work hard, they love being there, because they have a commitment to the organization, meaning the capital, to being there, and to the government, and to the whole thing—they don't have a commitment to the people that are their leaders, and that's really what is difficult now.

Fred followed up Mary’s example of a lack of commitment by redefining the idea of commitment in context with having the necessary talent to perform an assigned work task:

One more little twist. I've seen over the years people who are highly motivated and committed and interested in the work, but they are not quite right for all of it, maybe some of it, a niche, and the extent to which we find ways of making use of such people rather than fighting with them—it's worth the effort—sometimes people who thought they were better at this than they were but they can do something very valuable in terms of support for the function so you use them for that and others who can't do it, you try to find a way to use them.
The discussion by Helen, Fred, Matt, and Mary over the definition of the word commitment and the freedom to express a critical view of her workplace by Mary led to a new construction of the idea of commitment in an organization. The group provided a safe place for critical views and a forum for the negotiation over the term that occurred.

Another example of a presenter challenge occurred during a coaching group meeting. The presenter, a coach named Sally, demonstrated playing cards that she had developed to be used with coaching clients. The cards were designed to help clients think about their own leadership style. While most of the participants seemed to appreciate the concept of the cards, they did have questions about them. Some participants commented that the cards might appeal to a younger generation of leaders who would appreciate their tactile nature. Other participants questioned whether the cards would only be useful in face-to-face interactions with clients. Many of participants often worked with their clients remotely by telephone or through email communication. The presenter explained how she had used them in phone consulting as well, sending the cards via mail and then having the client send them back when the consultation was over.

A long-time participant named Jean suggested that she could envision the cards could be used as part of a performance evaluation. Sally strongly disagreed with this, stating that she advises clients who are managers against using the cards as part of an employee evaluation because employees may not feel free to explore their feelings of engagement if the cards are used during an evaluation. Her comment drew laughter and knowing nods from the participants, although Jean stood her ground and said she believed that the cards could be used effectively in evaluations and that the processes involved in using the cards to discuss leadership styles and evaluation were duplicative.
Presenters challenged ideas as well. During a coaching group meeting on professional networking skills the idea of having an “elevator speech” ready was discussed. Paula, the meeting’s presenter, challenged the term and the implications of it:

You know I don't like the term elevator speech. To me it demeans the very important trust building process that is going on during that time—that it's a 30 second commercial—it's not a commercial. This is a relationship where you are trying to teach people and build some trust, and so I don't like those terms at all.

Many participants engaged in questioning their own organization, particularly in the government group where most of the participants worked for organizations. In a discussion of empowering employees to implement change in organizations, Joan, a government employee, discussed the differences between her current organization and what she had observed while working in the private sector:

In the federal government, the people I'm seeing who are promoted to managers who were very good at compliance, they made sure to keep everything safe, they are not necessarily the risk takers, and I think my experience is that you got a lot of great ideas down here, like you were saying, it's not just trying to put a stop on it, but they are thinking they are keeping it safe and there's a lot of value for compliance in that these days with the budget. In private industry, I have not found that, the ones who advance are the ones who take risks developed a different way of doing things in my world, when I'm trying to promote something new and tell them it's going to be OK, we aren't breaking anything, by doing it differently, I think that's my challenge we haven't done it here, we haven't done it like this for years and years and that's the way we've done it.
Joan’s comment led to an exchange with Fred on the concept of change:
Fred: Is the change needed, and why? I don't think enough time is spent in this zone.
Joan: Especially for people who have been in agencies for a long time—oh, we have tried that change before—and there are people who come in and just want to change and have to provide why the change is needed.
Fred: The best change is bottom up and top down at the same time—develop coalitions. When people believe change is going to happen, that is the best indicator that it will—when the train has left the stations, the naysayers stop shouting so loudly.

The negative experience of a participant has again resulted in unpacking and negotiation of a definition of change in the workplace. The exchange below was from the meeting on the importance of using data in evaluation. Carol, a government employee, discussed the lack of credence given training evaluation metrics in the organization’s certification programs resulting in the presenter, Matt, to express skepticism of certification programs. Carol’s response demonstrated the negotiation of domain-specific terminology that often occurred during meetings:

Carol: Statistics and gathering statistics to show whether there is performance occurring is a new concept to the judiciary that we've been fighting for quite some time but in order to justify training expenses now we have to start showing metrics so if we have to start showing metrics we have to put some kind of performance standard in place so we can actually show more than "butts in seats,"
which doesn't tell you whether or not you have a transfer of knowledge. We're, you know, kind of starting down this road.

Matt: We had the [senior Human Resource officers] come in and talk and discuss...one of the things I'm hearing more and more is certifications do not always add up the improved performance and what I've heard from people recently is you know we've had everyone get certified in X and get to Level 2 in Y but it turns out some people come back and they have the certificate but it doesn't translate to improved performance.

Carol: Yes, we've made a distinction between certificates and certifications because some groups in the judiciary wanted to put together a certificate programs and I balked because it would be difficult to show that the certificate had any worth even those certificates as you said provided by third parties providers and we use an outside source to determine whether or not the certificate value does not always translate, something that we do in-house we are going to measure it and use standardize—maybe we don't want certificates or certificate programs. It's a huge culture change for us.

An Experiential Space

Both groups provided opportunities for participants to share experiences and funds of knowledge. The space created in the groups increased participant comfort in sharing both positive and negative experiences. Sharing experiences fostered information
flow within the groups. Jill discussed sharing her professional experiences with the coaching group’s participants:

I do [share experiences]. In my work, I'm a coach, I also do three other things, so that informs me and I use that. I'm also a cranial psychotherapist—it's a hands-on healing modality and I combine it with coaching it helps the coaches to reach their goals more quickly, it helps the body flow, it just works, sometimes the things I do a lot of that work and sometimes I've learned a lot I apply to coaching, so a lot of wisdom comes through that so I will share that sometimes.

Participants shared both professional and personal experiences. Moje et al. (2004) described Third Space classrooms where learners drew from their life experiences and funds of knowledge to create spaces for learning based on the hybridity of the experiences of the learners. Experiential learning models have framed sharing experiences as contributing to transcendent and transformational learning (Cell, 1984; Jarvis, 1987; Kolb, 1984). Within both of the groups, participants often shared experiences which contributed to learning through negotiated dialogue and unpacking of concepts under discussion.

Shared personal experiences contributed to the social bonding space for participants. As aforementioned, in the coaching group the community time at the end of one meeting was dedicated to remembrances of a long-time member of the group who had recently died. One by one, participants shared their feelings for their colleague. The remembrances not only honored her memory but exposed newcomers to the ideals and values of the group.
Jill discussed the benefits of sharing experiences during the coaching group’s small group learning activities:

I think when people do presentations and there's interaction you get to work in a small group, that's when I think that kind of things happen— so you’ll be sitting, working with someone you don't know, so you have these discussions that are facilitators for fifteen minutes, you'll talk about things maybe you wouldn't have that opportunity to talk about. You're sitting next to somebody you've never met before in conversation. There's some learning going on. That's what I think the biggest value in the [group] is not just listening to the speaker but to actually practice or discuss an issue with your fellow coaches.

Sharing experiences provided a way for ideas and resources to be shared that often led to discussions going in new directions. For instance, in a government group discussion on the importance of leadership in fostering better customer service Margo, a government employee, shared her own experience in a position she previously held in her current organization:

I just want to add something. I've been in that situation where we would follow that leader anywhere, where we would do anything for her for the things she did for us. And I just want to give you an example of one thing she did for us. OK, what does this look like? She had this thing called "Skip Meetings" and she was the head of the division and she would skip all the managers and she would meet with all the front line staff and you would come together and you could talk about anything you wanted, it was off-the-record but she would listen to you and she would hear complaints, she would hear praise, and then she would make some
changes and that helped from going from compliance to commitment, because you felt like you were valued, your input was valued, and you knew where you stood, because she took the time, to listen to people.

Margo transitioned from sharing a positive experience with a previous leader to suggesting a specific course for participants interested in leadership development. Margo’s experience reflected elements of the experiential learning cycle beginning with formulating an abstract conceptualization based on her experience and moving toward active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

The exchange below demonstrates how three members of the government group discussed the concept of change and leadership and came to a more specific understanding through discussion. The experiences shared move from a general observation by Fred to Joan’s linking a presentation that she had heard with as a possible explanation of the negative experiences shared by the group members:

Fred: I agree with that, an organization’s culture drives the risk tolerance, the [branch of the U.S. military] we saw it, operationally they were good but non-operationally they weren't.

Stan: It's hard to change. In my organization, senior managers are adamantly opposed to teleworking. Use coalitions—for instance mothers to senior leadership, we want this flexibility. They kept hammering them and hammering them, to finally change the culture.

Fred: One other thing you will find in the federal government, "This will pass."

Joan: It was interesting, we had a speaker come in yesterday who was talking about neuroscience, there was a field that was just established about five years
ago, and was looking at what happens when you are interacting so one of the things we take for granted, there's just neurological considerations. He just puts it out there, how we get insights, brainstorming is a way to get evolving ideas but when you want true insights that brainstorm doesn't work when you watch the brain trigger when you get a new idea, a new connection which is a real insight, and it only happens when the rest of the brain is quiet so when you have a brainstorming session by definition the rest of your brain isn't quiet enough to get new insights—it's really fascinating.

In another exchange from a government group discussion, experiences working with military leaders were explored in the context of improving leadership development. Fred, a retired officer in a branch of the U.S. military, responded to an experience shared by Matt:

Matt: I heard [senior U.S. military officer] speak a couple of times when he was running [U.S. military branch] one of the few times the head of an agency actually has his degree in public education and has been really schooled in this stuff, a unique leader.

Fred: I know [senior U.S. military officer] and folks love him when he took charge of the [U.S. military branch] and when [senior U.S. military officer] rose to the podium there was thunderous ovation, he's just the same— he's a [enlisted U.S. military service member] leader.

In a government group discussion highlighting employee wellness issues, Sally, the presenter, communicated a critical point regarding safe exercising practices through her personal experience. A personal trainer, Sally related an experience in dealing with
one of her personal training clients to illustrate the importance of commitment to safe exercising practices:

I have had clients I've fired because they don't get enough sleep. She was a lobbyist, she gets up at 6 a.m. and she's going to bed at 2:30. I cannot have her throwing around weights and doing whatever when she's half asleep. I was working with her for a while and we tried to make it better, we tried this and that, but she didn't change, and wasn't willing to change, and I said it's just a matter before you get hurt, and I can't be a part of that.

Sharing experiences constituted an important resource in the groups. In one government group meeting, participants were discussing establishing mentoring programs and many of them shared their experiences with a variety of vendors who provide mentoring services. Participants enthusiastically shared experiences and information. One presenter asked attendees questions about their own experiences with vendors. There were many questions centering on whether participants used commercial software or built systems in-house. Based on their experiences, participants detailed the advantages and disadvantages of both. Others contributed social media tools they had used. Many who attended did not have mentoring programs in their organizations and were keen to learn more about how to start a program. William, one the presenters, provided information on his experiences with a vendor his agency uses, while another presenter named Kim built upon William’s contribution by introducing another option into the discussion:

William: We're using a vendor—Mentoring Connection is the tool, the Training Connection is the vendor. The Training Connection—we are using them to come
in to do the opening training one month into the program and six months then the closing ceremony as well. So we are using them during this pilot and it's possible we will take on the responsibilities later.

Kim: We are focusing on coaching, and how to teach those coaching and facilitation skills for mentors because we have so many mentees in our program, we are looking to develop those mentors and empower and making sure they feel they have the skills to help others, but we also have the monthly events.

The discussion then turned to using emerging social media in developing inexpensive mentoring opportunities:

William: D-chat, IM, Social media, SharePoint Discussion Boards, Yammer, Adobe Connect.

Phyllis: Govloop. They have just started recruiting mentors, then they are going to open it to mentees, and there's going to be a structured situation mentoring program.

In addition to sharing information, Kim discussed the benefits of remote mentoring and the transformation it had on her:

My mentor right now is in Atlanta, someone in [colleague’s] office, and it's going very fabulously so I am a huge proponent of online learning which she's also a certified coach and is pushing me which is wonderful but sometimes I'm like I just can't do it today, but it's a great thing too, it's totally changed my life and my own approach to my development.
Later in the same discussion, William and Phyllis shared their experiences that resulted in information for participants seeking inexpensive solutions to establish and foster mentoring programs:

William: I would also like to piggyback on [participant’s] offer of collaboration. When [William’s colleague] and I collaborated we cut it down and had two or three other offices come in, and that cut it some more, so we are down to actually offering the program for about $350 per participant and what we did was just created a BPA [Blanket Purchase Agreement] everybody funds their numbers—I think we got, what? Fifty partnerships with other offers and it came to about $10,000, but that's with all the training all the bells all the whistles, so I think that collaboration method is something good to look at because any agency can ride on a BPA once it's constructed and sometimes there's limitations to cost per year. I think that would be something good for agencies that are lacking some funds.

Phyllis: There's been something since 2002 called the Federal Mentoring Roundtable. It's a group of people who do mentoring that get together and some years we get together twice a year and some years we get together once a year and after several years at several places we settled on NIH which has this lovely free place we can use and so it's a lovely conference center right by the Metro—does not cost money.

In the coaching group, the use of structured learning activities encouraged participants to share their experiences. In the meeting where playing cards were presented for use with coaching clients in promoting employee development and transition, participants were paired up mid-way through the presentation and asked to use
the cards with their partner. People shared their own experiences during the activity while the presenter discussed how the cards should be used by coaches. Several participants discussed how the cards could be used based on their own coaching experiences. Ideas that were shared by the presenter based on her experiences with the cards included onboarding new employees, mentoring, and developing vacancy announcements. One participant, who works in cross-cultural consulting areas, mentioned that she thought the cards would help demonstrate that there were universal ideas of employee engagement and that everything was not always cultural in nature.

In the government group discussion on providing “customer delight,” Fred, the presenter in this discussion, and participants David and Susan shared positive customer service experiences. The conversation evolved into defining one indicator of an organization’s excellence—the number of people who are willing to volunteer with the organization:

David: Ritz-Carlton. I've dealt with them quite a bit, and I remember with one of my training classes, years ago, they wanted a photo opportunity, the instructor was retiring, and I wanted a photo of giving her an apple for the teacher so I mentioned to one of the people who worked there, is [sic] there any apples around? And they immediately came back with an apple, so we could take a photograph, but Ritz-Carlton has always been very very good operation to deal with.

Susan: D.C. Central Kitchen, cause they allow those people to become caterers, and I've been to a few events where they do the catering, and they have cars that say D.C. Central Kitchen, and these were people that were homeless and it's
amazing.

Fred: Have you ever visited it? We visited.

Susan: We volunteered with Foods for Friends, which is a separate thing but pretty similar.

Fred: Just to play off her comment, there's a 90 day waiting list just to volunteer, so you are talking about something that's done well.

Discussions also empowered participants to examine their own limitations. Stan recalled a government group meeting on improving presentation skills:

You know we've had seminars on being a better presenter and people being very candid about their own sense of limitations, which is a group setting like that and the group learning thing is surprising, when you hear someone candidly talk of their own sense of frustration, their own sense of limitations you see how, you get a sense of how there's a commonality among people.

A Social Space

The groups reflected an active social space. Leverbre (1991) described a social space, or “being in the world,” as an integrated component of his conception of the Trialectics of Spatiality that explains Third Space, but in the sense that Third Spaces transcend social space. I argue that the social space is a critical component of a Third Space. Friendships and networks were developed between participants and these were important in creating the safe environment where participants could share frank views and challenge each other and themselves. This was particularly evident with long-time
participants who would introduce newcomers to the ways of the group. Enculturation occurred in the coaching group when the leader reiterated each meeting that the goals of the group were learning, growth and community. In the coaching group, this helped define the group’s identity. The meetings themselves were structured to meet those social goals. Stan, the government group leader, usually gave a brief history of the group and discussed the group’s goals. Both groups had several newcomers and people who might come to a meeting due to the urging of a colleague or based on the specific discussion topic. For those participants who continued to attend over time, the meetings provided the space for developing close professional and personal relationships. In one meeting, Paula, a presenter in the coaching group, had asked the leader whether participants used name tags. The leader laughed and said the group does not require name tags, because if somebody needs to get someone’s attention, he or she will just say “Hey you!”

Relationships developed through participation in the group were important even if they were not necessarily perceived as actual friendships by participants. Jill from the coaching group described her relationships with other participants:

I don't know a lot of people but as time has gone on now I know a lot of people. But they’re different people, so in the group there are not a lot of people I'm friends with, a few, so some people I get together with and now I've brought a lot of my colleagues into the group as well so it's hard for me to differentiate whether I've implemented, but I would say people have definitely influenced me.

Stan also noted that his relationship with fellow group participants fell short of friendship but were nonetheless very important to him:
Really, one thing—learning and enjoyable comfortable experience that they feel safe to ask questions and to take some good ideas away or to be stimulated to think maybe I should look into this more at a particular issue or this got me thinking in a different way, but it's a different dynamic. There are definitely people there who have become friends but you don't have the same daily interactions as you would with a colleague that you've worked with for twenty years.

Jill elaborated further on how relationship with other participants:

From my own experience they honor you for how and who you are—it's not that everybody must be the same. I'm definitely different, and the more that I've allowed myself to show off who I really am, the more I've been accepted into the group, which I found really interesting.

Jill reflected on participant introductions in the coaching group and how personal connections that were forged between participants inspired change:

When people introduce themselves, it's not an introduction that I'm here to impress you, it's I'm here to tell you who I really am, and as I'm leading it, and I think [the former coaching group leader] did this too—that is there's something you think is important and that people should hear about or you, have a question that you think somebody could talk to you about or help you out after, during networking, then put the question out there, so it's more open rather than saying, “I'm working at [an organization] and I'm making that kind of money,”— it's not that kind of thing. I mean people have been very open—we had somebody who had this wonderful job and was so honored to do coaching—he was let go. So the
way he talked about it was he had this great gig going and all of a sudden it's over and now he's back being a coach, trying to learn the business of finding clients again, and he had never had to do that. I like the fact that people are real about what's going on with them.

**A Resource Space**

The groups functioned as resource and information sharing space that contributed to learning. David reflected on this benefit in the government group:

I've noticed over time, that the [organization] has quite a few useful and interesting educational tools and the presentations in the [organization] are an easy way of getting that information if you don't have time to read the articles or the book, especially the book, listening the speakers you can pick up quite a few tips on instructional strategies and problem areas.

Stan described how information that is provided in the government group can be applied in work and in life outside of work:

I think very applicable. I've tried to set these things up that they would benefit HR people, they would benefit managers that they would benefit the rank and file employee and so I think, there's been topics that don't really relate to things that I'm involved with but I think they are, for the most part, relevant to not only my work life, but I think to any [organization] employee, or for that matter any employee, whether you are in HR, whether you are learning about coaching, you can apply that in any setting or human performance improvement, or project
management. We had a speaker who talked about the skills needed in project management and another talked about enhancing your leadership skills. We've had people come and talk about action learning—and it is relevant not in all contexts, but I definitely think you can use it in your own life.

Presenters provided a direct conduit for sharing information and resources. Stan discussed how participants react with speakers in the government group meetings:

I think at every event, every seminar, there's either an interaction between an audience member and the speaker or a statement that is really noteworthy, or a take-away, and it can be as varied as someone talking about physical fitness and the importance of alleviating stress in the workplace to the significance of hiring combat vets, the importance of first line managers, why we want to use GIS [Geographical Information Systems] in the measuring and improvement of [organization] programs. So there's definitely statements and questions, interactions that I remember, and then you associate those with certain people and they become, sometimes more memorable than others.

Presenters challenged participants often as outsiders to the group. Paula, the presenter at a coaching group discussion on networking, corrected misconceptions that the participants may have had about the term of art:

There are some misconceptions about networking. Probably the biggest one out there is that networking is about talking and taking—absolutely not, it's about teaching and giving, it's about teaching people who you are, what you've come to for, what you're good at, what kind of things they can count on you for—that's all done through conversation, somewhat through LinkedIn I must admit but mostly
through face-to-face conversation. And then it's also about giving, listening so generously that you can help other people find what they need to find, whether it's something that enhances their leisure life or their professional life.

During the government group discussion on improving performance in the government, Fred discussed the inadequacy of the government’s Chief Performance Officer. The information provided context for understanding what performance means in the government, according to Fred—an emphasis on narrow problem solving rather than on fostering a strategic vision:

Fred: Well there is, but it's not real well known, the Chief Performance Officer's office.

Joan: I've heard of it.

Fred: Well, long story short, we chased then. I found them to be more focused on solving problems than creating architectural changes—reduce the hiring time, fix IT. I think there is an intent to go there.

Summary

What emerged from the corpus of data was a Third Space informal learning environment characterized by a system of four highly interconnected and interdependent spaces. Figure 4.1 illustrates the interconnected spaces in the system.
Figure 4.1. Third Space Conceptualization.

Safety was critical to the entire system, enabling participants in these groups to find their voices and cross cultural boundaries with fellow participants. The result was a social space where participants freely discussed both positive and negative experiences. Many of the shared experiences resulted in participants engaging in sense making through discussion and negotiation of terms and ideas. Participants shared resources that others could use to in their work and lives. As expressed in Bhabha’s (1994) conception of Third Space, a new culture emerged drawing upon the experiences and resources of participants that provided participants with a space for enunciation in between work and personal boundaries. A new location for work culture emerged.

The importance of experiential learning with transcending one’s marginal status of being in the world was critical to the application of Third Space conceptualizations of learning environments. (Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Gutiérrez et al., 1997, 1999; Moje et al., 2004). The groups also exhibited characteristic elements of “Thirding-as-Othering”
(Soja, 1996, 2009). Both discussion groups functioned as spaces for professional and personal growth but were not work spaces. They were other and in-between new spaces where participant learning and transformation occurred. While the spaces were related to the participants’ professional interactions within their own workplaces, they were also different, bordering the workplace but existing completely separate from it.

I have conceptualized a Third Space learning environment that recognizes the value of sharing information and experiences on the informal learning opportunities for participants interacting within system. The discussion groups provided space for participants to safely question their own assumptions, a critical element of transformational learning as described by Argyris (1982), Cell (1984), and Mezirow (1990).
Chapter 5

Discussion

In this ethnographic study I explored professional discussion groups, known as groups, through a Third Space lens that incorporated informal and experiential learning theories. I examined whether group meetings exhibited Third Space characteristics and whether a space for learning and personal transformation existed. I sought to uncover whether the existence of the space within the groups for working professionals to explore ideas and share experiences that would possibly result in discomfort for participants if they were to express these same ideas in their own work environments or among their clients.

Research Questions

I incorporated three research questions into my study of Third Space. A brief summary of the findings for each question are presented in this section.

Research question 1: Patterns of interaction. My first question asked what patterns of interaction were noted in the discussion groups that related to Third Space notions. In both groups I found that participants shared experiences, funds of knowledge, information, and resources. Participants engaged in disagreement and counterscript. Both groups displayed participant bonding, although this phenomenon appeared more
pronounced in the coaching discussion group, due to the fact that there were more long-time participants that attended regularly.

**Research question 2: Knowledge sharing.** The second research question asked about the role of funds of knowledge and shared experiences in the discussion groups. These were pivotal in both groups in providing group participants with a basis for engaging in collective sense-making. These activities helped transform the groups into informal learning environments in addition to Third Spaces. In both groups, participants shared resources to fellow participants in addition to resources provided by the monthly presenters. In the coaching group, learning activities were incorporated by presenters that made use of tools and resources that encouraged participants to further share their own experiences and funds of knowledge with fellow participants.

**Research question 3: Sense-making processes.** My third research question asked how participants engaged in group sense-making. I found that participants in both groups engaged in active discussions where terms and ideas were explored collectively. In some instances, participants would negotiate over terms and ideas, engaging in collective sense-making of ideas. Both groups provided a safe space for open dialogue, including participant counterscript and disagreement which was turned into new learning and ideas.

**The Importance of Safety in Third Space**

I have discovered there are definitional differences of Third Space in the literature. I uncovered in my research that these types of discussion groups do provide an
environment for Third Space interactions to occur. Through my study of two discussion groups, I have sought to contribute to knowledge about Third Space, particularly as it represents an informal learning environment for working professionals and other adult learners. In this study, I conceptualized Third Space as a system of interconnected, loosely bounded spaces. Safety is at the center of this system—safety for participants to express opinions, engage in counterscript, draw upon funds of knowledge, and share resources and experiences. Each of these activities comprises a space that is interconnected to the other and linked by the safety for things to happen that transcend the ostensible purposes of the group. Third Space interactions occur naturally through the dialogue that occurs in the space. Safety is inferred in Third Space philosophical conceptions of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) and Thirding-as-Othering (Soja, 1996, 2009) as well as academic research conducted in formal classroom settings that defined Third Space as student empowerment through dialogic counterscript (Gutiérrez et al., 1997, 1999) or drawing upon funds of knowledge and integrating life experiences (Moje et al., 2004). My research puts the notion of safety at the core of a Third Space by linking it with established informal and experiential learning theories. For instance, questioning one’s own assumptions and the assumptions of others is a critical element of experiential learning theories (Argyris, 1982; Cell, 1984; Jarvis, 1987; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1987). Using resources and shared experiences in a safe environment was typical of interactions in the group meetings which provided frequent opportunities for participants to unpack ideas and collectively make sense of relevant terms. Some of the group participants engaged in reflective activities as a result of their participation as well,

**Possibilities for Future Research**

**Expanding Third Space Theory into Different Settings**

My exploratory research points to several avenues for future research that crosses into different settings. I specifically was interested in studying discussion groups that exist on the boundaries of workplace environments, but there are many other types of settings that people patronize or participate in—libraries, religious groups, and hobby clubs, among others. Whitchurch (2008) found Third Space interactions in his study of universities in which faculty crossed boundaries through service on committees that tended institutional issues. Elmborg (2010) argued that libraries should adapt to changing culture by transforming from Lefebvre’s concept of dominated space in which heavy-handed rules are the norm to a representational space, or a Third Space that is “open, symbolic, generative, and playful.” Zaver (2013) studied multi-religious dialogue across faiths as Third Space boundary crossing interactions. Eisen (1998) and the National Research Council in its book *Learning Science in Informal Environments* (2009) cited hobby clubs as an example of an informal learning activity for older learners and families respectively. This raises many possibilities for future research. Do these types of groups demonstrate Third Space properties? Does an individual’s feelings of being marginalized in some way a necessary prerequisite for a Third Space location to arise?
Third Space in Virtual Online Networks

In its book, *Learning Science in Informal Environments*, the National Research Council (2009) cited virtual environments as an emerging setting for informal learning environments. Looking at Third Space in online virtual settings would be another direction for future research. Many of the groups in the host organization meet virtually, usually through a web conferencing application. I consciously chose not to include any of the virtual groups in my sample, given their completely different format. Exploring virtual learning spaces from a Third Space perspective might provide an interesting path for future research.

Third Space in Individual Spaces

Another path for research emerged from one of my interviews with a participant, Jill, who since the conclusion of my data collection has become the leader of the coaching group. During the interview, she had expressed great interest in the idea of Third Space, almost to the point of interviewing me about it. After briefly explaining Third Space concepts to Jill, she mentioned that she believed creating a Third Space environment is what good coaches should try to do with their clients. It occurred to me at the time that she had a good point and that would make for interesting research. After one coaching group meeting during the community time, a participant who was a yoga instructor mentioned that he thought I should consider how yoga might provide Third Space possibilities. This led me to reflect on what sort of spaces might actually function as a Third Space—might an individual’s own space be a Third Space? There has been
research in this area. In her Third Space study of a woman educator working in a developing country, English (2002) explored her own sense of identity resulting from the dualism of her feminism and devotion to Catholicism. English believed an in-between Third Space existed within her where she reconciled the contradictions of being both a feminist and a Catholic woman.

**Third Space Experimental Studies**

Finally, given that the purpose of qualitative research is to generate theories and hypotheses rather than to test and confirm them, an opportunity exists for researching Third Space through a structured experimental study. For instance, does a Third Space learning environment result in more, or different kinds of, learning? Virtually all of the research that I uncovered in the literature of Third Space has been qualitative in nature. I believe there are opportunities to quantitatively test a wide array of variables in an experimental study, including learner achievement, feelings of safety, and participant interaction.

**Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of my research was that it was sometimes challenging to get informed consent from potential participants. As research groups, these groups existed “in the wild” and were not well-controlled research environments. People sometimes arrived late to meetings after I had introduced my research or left very soon after the
conclusion. The group leaders were supportive in allowing me to introduce my study at the beginning of each meeting that I observed, but I had to be careful not to disrupt the flow of the introductions. For instance, the coaching group leader, while very gracious in supporting my research, did ask me to take no more time in the introductions than was allotted to other participants. This was understandable due to the time constraints and tight schedule for the meetings. There were interesting interactions that I could not report because those involved had not consented to participate in the study. However, I worked through these challenges and believe that I accumulated enough data from participants to make my research findings meaningful.

**Design Considerations**

As an instructional designer, I am always looking for efficient ways to promote effective workplace learning. I believe that informal learning is often a more powerful approach than formal instruction, particularly in workplace environments. One important idea to emerge from my research is the discovery of a successful learning environment for working professionals. Rather than developing more formal training, organizations might turn to fostering Third Spaces. The results of my research provide designers with a blueprint for designing learning environments where those individuals who may feel marginalized by their organizational culture have space to grow and transform their organizations. For instance, Gutiérrez et al. (1999) suggested that Third Space interactions thrived in a classroom they studied because the teacher was “theoretically grounded in cultural-historical theories of learning and development and Frierean
pedagogies.” It can also provide designers with a list of things they should not do if they are looking to realize the transformational qualities of Third Space. An argument based on Lefebvre’s (1991) notions of Third Space can be made that too much control and authority over the space is antithetical to the whole theory of Third Space—that Third Spaces are formed and exist without planning (or to use the language of Lefebvre, Third Spaces are not *conceived* or *representation* of spaces). As a designer, I believe designing spaces where Third Space interactions occur naturally is possible but requires allowing participants freedom to make the space their own. Within reason, conflict and irreverence in participant dialogue should not be suppressed. Taken together, conflict and challenging authority can provide a powerful springboard for learning. Opportunities for sharing experiences and funds of knowledge should be integrated into a design along with opportunities to reflect and challenge experiences introduced into the space.

Despite concerns about over-designing Third Space environments, the study provided some design considerations for those interested in incorporating the benefits of Third Space interactions in a learning environment. To avoid an over-designed space, designers may want to empower group participants to establish as many of the norms as possible. In her book on user design principles, Carr-Chellman (1998) encouraged using techniques to empower users to design their own systems, such as learning environments, rather than imposing a design upon them. Using such design principles would lead to a design that is more open and less of a conceived representation of space as discussed by Lefebvre (1991). Designers should strive to create a safe environment for free and open interaction. In the case of the two groups in my study, both leaders created a spirit of openness of dialogue, including allowing for counterscript and disagreement and conflict.
within reason, and safety. I should point out that both groups existed at the borders of workplaces but were not situated within a workplace, thus providing a buffer for participants between their work environments or clients in the case of the coaching group. This buffer contributed to the feelings of safety for group participants. Can such buffered spaces exist within workplaces organizations? Would not safety and by extension openness be compromised in such scenarios? I believe it is possible, but designers should work with participants to establish norms that ensure a level of confidentiality. Discussion groups that meet virtually may provide a buffer for instance. Designers of Third Space environments are advised to incorporate activities and discussion possibilities that foster sharing of experiences, funds of knowledge, and resources. The coaching group provided such learning activities in each meeting. The coaching group leader provided a design of his group activities that was compatible with Third Space ideals. For instance, he divided his group meetings in distinct phases, including community time and the beginning and end of the meetings and a middle segment devoted to learning and discovery in the middle of the meeting. The community time provided space for participants to engage in counterscript and share experiences and resources. The time spent on learning encouraged these activities as well as fostering collective sense-making through designed learning activities. I would characterize these activities as learner-centered and constructivist in nature. The safety that participants felt to engage in learning was critical. Gutiérrez et al. (1995) reported that a teacher with a background in cultural historical pedagogies was well-equipped to promote a Third Space learning environment in that she did not restrict student engagement in counterscript that allowed for an in-between dialogic space where learning occurs. A teacher or discussion
group leader that seeks to control an environment by controlling counterscript and free flow of ideas may suppress the emergence of a Third Space.

I believe care should be exercised in designing Third Space learning environments. Designers can also create an environment where conditions are suitable for Third Space interactions to emerge. While the problem of relying on conceived spaces (i.e., Second Space) has been noted, I believe that a conceived space is a necessary component of Third Space. A key consideration for the designer interested in promoting the emergence of a Third Space environment is to create a learning environment in which Third Space interactions can freely flourish and are not constrained by a highly designed environment.
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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. What brought you to the [organization] [group]?
2. How long have you been attending [group] meetings?
3. Do you try to attend every meeting or pick and choose which ones to attend?
4. What ideas have you taken away from the experiences of others who have attended meetings?
5. Have you applied the experiences of others in the [group] in your work life? Describe these experiences and how you have used them in your work.
6. Tell me about some work experiences you’ve shared with others in [group] meetings?
7. What impressions do you have of your fellow [group] attendees? How do you interact with them? How do they compare to your co-workers?
8. How much do you reflect upon what you hear at [group] meetings? What was something that someone said that caused you to reflect?
9. What have been the most surprising things that people have shared during [group] meetings you’ve attended?
10. How have you surprised fellow [group] attendees during meetings?
11. How applicable are the [group] topics and discussions to your work life?
12. How does your relationships with other [group] attendees compare to those with your co-workers?
13. Do you believe the [group] is an extension of your work? If yes, how so? In no, why not?
14. What are issues you feel comfortable discussing in your [group] that you would not feel comfortable discussing in your workplace?
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